Who is responsible for making your campus a safe environment for learning and personal growth? The vast majority of college campuses have a department dedicated to public safety and committees that focus on emergency preparedness and planning. However, involvement in campus safety initiatives shouldn’t start and end with these groups.
Colleges that don’t involve their student population in campus safety are missing a huge opportunity. When the entire campus community is invested in maintaining a safe, secure environment, the campus climate in general becomes more productive and collaborative. Not to mention, students are plugged into the campus social scene and often have information about dangerous behavior and campus crime that campus safety officials simply aren’t privy to.

Getting students to take an active role in campus safety can be challenging, and it requires more effort than simply giving incoming students a safety presentation during orientation. When it’s done correctly, and students are stakeholders in campus safety, the benefits easily outweigh the effort. Campuses get safer, students feel more connected to the college community, and communication barriers between the authority (campus safety officials) and the majority (students) break down.

Empowering students as safety stakeholders begins with a basic necessity: students should feel connected to their campus community in some way. If they don’t feel like they are a part of campus life—even in a small facet—chances are they won’t feel compelled to take a role in improving safety and security.

Luckily, there are myriad groups focused on helping students find their niche and get connected on campus. Residence Life, student outreach groups and other resources work to bolster social connectivity through campus events and identifying students that may need assistance.

**Be Proactive**

The first step in making safety a community endeavor is ensuring that your safety department is part of your community. Too often, safety and security officials can get caught in a reactive cycle—where the only contact they have with students is disciplinary in nature.

Don’t wait until something goes wrong on campus to make your presence felt. Students should be familiar with campus safety officials as individuals. Building meaningful connections with students facilitates trust and understanding, which in turn makes students more likely to contact the campus safety department and help further campus safety initiatives.

Demonstrating your department’s impact can also send a message to students about your department’s priorities. Sharing statistics and results from your efforts to keep students safe and deter crime on campus shows them that your department is invested in their well-being—and that you do more than just confiscate alcohol and break up parties.
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Collaborate
In order to involve students in campus safety, it’s essential to partner with other organizations both on and off campus. A crucial element of building a sense of community is connecting with other groups. Offering your department’s services for student events can go a long way in developing trust and open communication with students and staff.

Some campus safety departments have had a lot of success building relationships with groups that are typically anti-establishment or wary of authority through efforts to collaborate on projects. Other times, simply reaching out to these groups to ask for input on campus safety issues can be huge. Go to them; don’t wait for them to come to you. When students and staff know that their input is valued, and their voices are being heard, they feel more connected to safety and security policies and in turn become more invested in campus safety.

Training is Crucial
Most campus safety departments are responsible for providing basic safety training to residence life departments, student housing staff, and other facilities personnel. General training
will cover emergency procedures (like what to do in a weather emergency), when and how to contact campus safety, and what to do if you see someone or something suspicious. This is a great start, but the training on what to do when you see something suspicious should be expanded for maximum effect.

Ideally, every student and staff member should receive training on how to handle suspicious behavior—and more importantly, what is suspicious behavior. During one training session with residence life coordinators, a leading campus safety consultant was shocked that no one in the room was able to articulate what constituted a suspicious person, a suspicious package, or suspicious behavior.

College campuses can present unique challenges—oftentimes, students see suspicious or alarming behavior, but the anxiety and uncertainty over reporting what they see keep them from doing anything about it. Because many college students are living on their own for the first time, it can be harder to evaluate a situation and determine the best way to respond—especially in situations with increased ambiguity.

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We can find a tragic example of this in the aftermath of the Virginia Tech massacre, when multiple students recalled seeing a suspicious hooded man lurking outside of Norris Hall (where the shooting spree occurred) two days before the massacre. Students also recalled that some doors to Norris Hall had been chained shut during the same time. Students saw these things, identified them as out of the ordinary, but weren't compelled to notify anyone until after the unthinkable had happened.

Reporting suspicions to campus safety can be daunting. Students worry about getting in trouble, or getting friends in trouble and being ostracized or facing retaliation. In dangerous situations, students may think that calling campus safety or calling 911 can increase danger by aggravating a potential attacker.

In addition to training on how to recognize and respond to suspicious activity, campus safety departments should provide training on how to be a good witness, and bystander intervention. It’s also important to educate students about what constitutes specific types of crime in order to fight misconceptions about what should be reported. Too often, crimes go unreported simply because students are not aware that they have actually been a victim of a crime or violation of the university’s code.

Tools for a Safe, Connected Campus

With that in mind, new tools have been developed to help overcome the obstacles that keep students from reporting suspicions and engaging with their campus safety department. One such tool, a new app called Blert!, is designed to facilitate discreet communication between the campus community and campus safety department. Students can download the free app, and through a chat interface, quickly, safely, and anonymously converse with campus safety personnel. In ambiguous situations, or when students aren’t sure what they should do, using Blert! is an easy way to check with someone who does know what to do and can offer help.

Blue light phones placed strategically around college campuses have helped increase safety on campus for years, by providing a direct line to campus safety officials who can offer assistance. Blue light phones are an integral element to building a safer college campus—but having a direct line to campus safety via a smartphone app like Blert! can expand the network of safety beyond the areas where blue light phones are located. The more your campus safety department can work to place the tools for safety and communication into the hands of students, the more they can help students become stakeholders in the safety of their campus community.

Engaging students in safety, helping them become more aware of their surroundings through training, and connecting to build trust between students and campus safety officials is vital to building a strong, healthy campus where individuals are empowered to take an active role in safety.

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