**In the Wake of the Orlando Mass Shooting: The Critical Role of AASCU Campuses**

By Michelle R. Davis

The mass shooting in June inside Orlando’s gay nightclub, Pulse, killed 49 people and wounded 53 others; it was a tragedy that reverberated across the country.

The deadly event took place just miles from the University of Central Florida and hit hard on campus: a UCF student and an alum were among those killed, and many students and faculty had ties to other victims. The shooter, who had been radicalized and pledged allegiance to terror group ISIS, deliberately targeted members of the LGBTQ community.

So determining the best way to provide support as a university took careful thought. Ultimately the campus held several vigils, which played an important part in the community healing process, and launched blood drives. An emotional video message of support by university President John C. Hitt, released the day of the shooting, captured the sadness and grief many felt after learning of the murders.

This fall, as the new school year begins, the university will host workshops and community engagement projects around tolerance and other issues related to the shooting, said Grant J. Heston, university spokesman.

“Every university has a plan for disaster on campus, but it’s less clear how you handle a tragedy in your community,” he said.

Navigating institutional responses in times of local calamities—whether man-made or natural disasters—is perhaps even more important for AASCU campuses. AASCU institutions are anchors in the communities they serve and act as "stewards of place," a term coined by AASCU in 2002 to describe the role of state colleges and universities and explored through a series of reports.

AASCU schools are deeply embedded in the communities where they are located, serving a higher proportion of students living and growing up there, with multi-layered ties to their surrounding neighborhoods.

As "stewards of place," these schools emphasize the essential qualities of being integrated into the community, forging relationships with local organizations and leaders.

“For AASCU institutions, part of what defines them is their institutional identity. They’re not only in these communities, but they’re of the community,” said John Saltmarsh, the director of the New England Resource Center for Higher Education and contributor to the stewards of place.
Tragedy: Campuses

reports. “When there is a disaster, the deep, embedded relationships with the community are really critical.”

Expressing Values in Action

In Orlando, UCF’s strong community ties came into play even as the Pulse nightclub shooting unfolded. University police went to the crime scene to assist Orlando city officers. The university’s bomb sniffing dogs were dispatched to help. And as grief and shock began to set in, Hitt offered any assistance needed.

“It was the ultimate expression of our values in action,” Heston said. “We didn’t just send a note saying we care: we sent police, resources, counselors.”

But those actions had to be considered, Heston said. For example, the university was slow to release the names of victims connected to the university in order to double check and reconfirm the accuracy of information. A blood drive that had already been scheduled for the day after the shooting was overwhelmed, so several days later the university hosted another one in its stadium to process the hundreds of people who wanted to donate.

In addition, UCF allowed students to guide the agenda in some of its responses. The campus hosted a vigil bringing more than 1,000 people together, but students determined the timing, speakers and content.

“That’s why it was so powerful and real and authentic,” Heston said. “Students are the lifeblood of the university and you need to respond to their needs and desires.”

That authentic connection is one that institutions should draw on and build on in challenging times for their cities.

In Flint, Mich., where contaminated drinking water has sickened residents, caused lead poisoning in children, and has triggered a political furor over who is at fault and how to solve the problem, the University of Michigan-Flint has taken a lead role.

“It was both a crisis in the greater community, but also to the members of our campus community and our partners,” said Chancellor Susan E. Borrego, who is also a board member of the Greater Flint Health Coalition.

The university had to first make sure its own water supply was safe, then worry about students off campus, as well as the wider public. UM-Flint offered bottled water, water filters and replacements, spending hundreds of thousands of dollars to provide these free resources.

That was the immediate, urgent response, but the university is also working on long-term solutions. Faculty members from the university’s Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Center digitized city water records to analyze where 4,300 lead pipes were thought to be located, helping city officials prioritize replacement.

Faculty and students are also providing free lead testing for children and families until 100 percent of at-risk kids are screened, Borrego said. UM-Flint’s Department of Public Health and Health Sciences launched an eight-week course on the water crisis, covering the

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history of the breakdown, the science behind water delivery, health and political implications. The course was open to students for one credit, but also open to the public for free and available on YouTube. The idea for the course was inspired by a student, who proposed it as a capstone project, Borrego said.

“We have a unique role as we partner with other public health and social services agencies,” she said. “The university brings to bear the knowledge, resources and ability to convene experts, but it was important to do this with our local community partners to make sure we had the widest and deepest involvement we could.”

Early in 2016, UM-Flint also convened a gathering that included faculty from UM-Ann Arbor and UM-Dearborn to strategize on how best to help in the short-term, coordinate research, and propose longer-term solutions to the water problem. With a $150,000 grant from Google, a partnership between the three campuses has also produced a smartphone app and digital tools to manage and track information about the water crisis.

But Borrego said it is important for the campuses to pool resources and think through efforts to avoid replication and spinning of wheels.

“We’re trying to be very, very intentional so we can get the most out of people’s efforts to resolve these issues and enhance the quality of life in Flint,” she said.

Part of that intentionality meant thinking hard about the communication strategy used by the school, which is still trying to attract new students throughout the crisis.

“We didn’t want to be part of a story saying all of Flint is poisoned,” she said. “We talked a lot about trying to develop a parallel narrative.

“A constant drumbeat for me was how to tell the story and not create hysteria.”

Providing Safe Havens For Discussion

Being of the community also allows AASCU institutions to have authentic conversations about the difficult events they’re responding to, said Saltmarsh, of the New England Resource Center for Higher education.

“When conversations happen, they will be conversations that bring in voices from the community and welcome vastly different perspectives to the table,” he said. “There’s the ability to have more civil and productive discussions—rather than divisive and destructive ones—because of the deep relationships within the community.”

After the mass shooting in San Bernardino, Calif. on Dec. 2, 2015 by a radicalized married couple who pledged loyalty to ISIS leaders, nearby California State University, San Bernardino found numerous ways to respond. Five of the 14 killed and 22 injured in the attack were alums of the school, as was the shooter.

At an emotional campus vigil that drew more than 1,200 students and community members, Associate Professor and Arabic Language Program Coordinator Dany Doueiri gave a moving speech about tolerance, Islam and the role of the school in educating students about other religions and groups.

Doueiri is also a co-chair of CSUSB’s annual faculty-staff campaign to donate to charities. This year, the school created an option for donating to children of the victims of the attack, and also opened the drive to the public, said Joe Gutierrez, CSUSB spokesman.

Gutierrez said the school intends to continue discussions about tolerance on campus this academic year.

“We are part of this community and we take that very seriously,” he said.

That ability to have open and honest discussions about events that bring misfortune to an institution’s doorstep
is unique to colleges and universities that operate with a "stewards of place" mindset.

At the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, officials there grappled with the fact that one of its graduates was the gunman in a shooting attack at a nearby military recruitment facility on July 16, 2015 that left four U.S. Marines and one U.S. Navy seaman dead. Authorities called the killings “domestic terrorism.”

When television crews descended on a campus mostly empty for summer, instead of finding many voices to interview about the shooter, they saw one of the first public vigils for the victims, held on campus and coordinated by the Student Veterans Organization, said Chuck Cantrell, UT Chattanooga associate vice chancellor for communication. Coverage focused on the vigil instead.

“Our goal was to promote healing and unity. We didn’t want to become one of those communities where hatred and bigotry toward a different religion became the story for us,” he said, as the shooter was a devout Muslim. “We have a very active student veteran organization and they were very vocal in saying hatred and violence are not part of our campus—he didn’t learn that here.”

The university also hosted the official military remembrance ceremony for the victims, which featured Vice President Joe Biden, in the campus arena, and later held several community forums featuring leaders from the local Islamic community as well as government and religious leaders discussing how to address issues raised by the murders.

“College campuses should be safe havens for discussion and ideas and debate, but it is a place where we can disagree and talk about issues and explore,” Cantrell said. “The very first event [after the shooting] was held in a Baptist church, but a lot of the participants were from the Muslim community. There was no hatred, just unity.”

“Unlike media attention to the tragedy, UT Chattanooga’s response has not been fleeting—as the fallout from the shooting was not a blip for the community. The university has a permanent mural of the “fallen five” on campus, sponsors a Heroes Run in honor of the victims, and the local campus radio station partners with Operation Song, which pairs professional songwriters with active and retired military personnel to work through emotional issues.

**Being a Good Neighbor**

Because AASCU institutions are “of the community,” they often provide assistance in a wide variety of situations not directly related to what’s happening on campus. When flood waters inundated the area around West Virginia University this summer, officials there reached out to students and their families off campus to provide assistance. The university hosted Red Cross volunteers in the dorms and served as a collection point for donations for those impacted by flooding, said Kitty McCarthy, vice president for enrollment management and student affairs.

In 2013, a forest fire sweeping through South Fork, Colo.—about 45 minutes from the Adams State University campus—sent residents fleeing. When flames moved toward a popular campground, leaving campers nowhere to go, the university opened its dorms and donated water, blankets and food. The staff of the campground also took shelter there.

After historic river flooding in Fargo, N.D. in both 2009 and 2011, students organized to fill sandbags and build dikes; helped make plans for evacuating livestock; and faculty provided the community with research-based information on preparing for and recovering from flooding.

A summer heatwave in Illinois prompted Western Illinois University to open its buildings as cooling and water refilling centers for the community. Darcie Shinberger, the director of university relations, said the school does something similar during winter storms, providing rooms and resources for residents who may have lost power.

“The town of Macomb [where the school is located] is great to our institution, and our students work in the community and many residents work at the school,” Shinberger said. “Part of the town-gown relationship is being a good neighbor.”

Being part of the neighborhood also means understanding the people who live there and respecting their feelings about a tragic event, said Heston, of the University of Central Florida. That’s why, after the fatal shootings at the Pulse Nightclub, there was a deliberate effort to be purposeful about language and not use euphemisms that spoke of “lives lost,” Heston said.

“They weren’t lost, they were taken,” he said. “This shouldn’t be easy. Part of the healing process is acknowledging how hard this is and working to find solutions to it.”

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