

RESEARCH

How Can Colleges Head Off Homegrown Extremism?

By Liam Adams | DECEMBER 04, 2017



John Minchillo/AP Images

Abdul Razak Ali Artan injured 13 people at Ohio State U. in November 2016 in a vehicle and knife attack. A university police officer shot and killed Mr. Artan, a Somali refugee who the FBI concluded had been inspired by ISIS propaganda.

Higher education is not immune to episodes of extremist-fueled violence.

Such attacks have taken place at campuses like Ohio State University, Umpqua Community College, and elsewhere. And sometimes, the radicalized person who carried out the act was affiliated with a college, and was perhaps a student, like the Boston-Marathon bomber Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

What can colleges do to recognize the warning signs that might lead to an act of extremist violence, and how should they intervene?

A new paper, published in the journal *Violence and Gender*, was written for campus threat-assessment and behavioral-intervention teams, and points out the risk factors that can drive someone to commit acts of radicalized violence. These factors include

marginalization and disenfranchisement, social disengagement, and affiliation seeking. To counter the risk factors, the study suggests fostering social connections and nonviolent discourse.

The study, "An Exploration of the Risk, Protective, and Mobilization Factors Related to Violent Extremism in College Populations," assessed 30 incidents of extremist violence. Many — but not all — of them had a campus connection. At Ohio State, for example, Abdul Razak Ali Artan drove a car into a crowd of pedestrians, injuring 11, before a police officer shot and killed him. The Islamic State called Mr. Artan a "soldier." The FBI recently concluded that he acted alone, though he was "influenced by extremist ideology," including ISIS propaganda. And in 2015 at Umpqua Community College, Christopher Harper-Mercer shot and killed nine people as well as himself. Later reports said he left a manifesto in which he talked about his hatred of black men.

The authors of the new study — Brian Van Brunt, executive director of the National Behavioral Intervention Team Association, along with scholars from Angelo State University, in Texas, and Teachers College at Columbia University — found a common set of conditions that cause someone to embrace an ideology that advocates for violence. Many times, that person has felt "wronged, persecuted, destroyed," the authors wrote, by being marginalized or discriminated against in his community.

To escape the marginalization and subsequent desperation, people at risk of extremism will seek out groups that agree with their belief system and give them a sense of belonging. Sometimes, leaders within those groups exploit the individual follower's "cognitive opening," which is "frustration, anger, and desire to find something tangible to blame for his or her misfortune." The follower might embrace the radical teachings of the group, and the group might advocate for violence.

Radicalization can occur along different points of the political spectrum, says Mr. Van Brunt, who is also a past president of the American College Counseling Association. Any organization that uses, "intimidation, threats, and violence to advance their

agendas," he says, can be guilty of advocating for a radicalized agenda. Among those are the Earth Liberation Front, the Ku Klux Klan and other white-nationalist groups, and the Irish Republican Army, the study says.

Protective factors identified by the study can help colleges strengthen programs to prevent students from falling victim to extremist agendas. A main one is social connection, which gives people an opportunity to be around others who care for them, and can offer outlets to engage in civil discourse. In these spaces, the authors wrote, a person can learn how to "balance various opposing viewpoints simultaneously."

The report is not arguing against radical belief systems, says Mr. Van Brunt. The "idea of revolutionary radical I love. I think that's actually wonderful on a college campus," he said. What the report is trying to do is teach college staff and faculty to intervene early with "people with these beliefs who feel justified acting violently."

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