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Should students be allowed to carry concealed weapons?

The issue is expected to come up again for debate in Virginia.

By Jared Fleisher and [Alexandra Marks](#) | Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

The deadly shooting rampage at Virginia Tech on Monday has reignited an emotional debate about whether students should be allowed to carry concealed weapons on campus.

Virginia Tech, like most universities around the country, forbids students from having guns on campus. But as an increasing number of states have passed laws that allow people to carry concealed weapons, gun advocates from Virginia to Utah have also challenged the academic policies that prohibit weapons at colleges and universities.

Their argument is that guns can save lives. If the students at Virginia Tech were armed, they contend, they might have been able to stop the rampage before more than 30 of their classmates were killed.

"The only way you stop people like that is with like force," says Todd Gilbert, a Republican delegate in Virginia's General Assembly. "This guy, when he went on campus, certainly must have known he was entering a gun-free zone."

But opponents of guns on campus argue that their presence would dramatically increase violence in a variety of ways – from accidental discharges to fights being settled with bullets instead of fists. On their side are most university presidents and many law-enforcement officials, as well as academic research.

"The best science that we have says concealed carry laws do not save lives, as the proponents contend," says Jon Vernick, co-director of the Johns Hopkins Center for Gun Policy and Research in Baltimore.

That conclusion, while controversial among gun advocates, was recently endorsed by the American Academy of Sciences, according to Mr. Vernick. And Tuesday, law-enforcement officials in Virginia were quick to voice their concern that any more guns in a situation as chaotic as Monday's could have resulted in more harm than good.

"You can never protect against this kind of incident," said Dana Schrad, executive director of the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police, in a telephone interview. "I have my own concerns that, had there been a number of people who had been in that classroom with guns, [there could have been] additional persons killed just as a result of poor judgment calls."

But such arguments do not convince gun advocates. Mr. Gilbert, the General Assembly delegate, started fighting to allow guns on campus after an incident in 2005 involving another Virginia Tech student. The individual, who had a valid permit, was discovered carrying a concealed handgun on campus. He was told that, according to university policy, he could not carry it. If he did, he risked expulsion.

Gilbert then introduced a bill in the General Assembly in 2006. It would have allowed students or employees with concealed-handgun permits to carry those guns on state university campuses without risk of being expelled or fired. (A Virginia resident must be at least 21 years old to receive such a permit, and guns would still not have been allowed inside dorms or at sporting events.) Gilbert introduced the bill at the urging of the Virginia Citizens Defense League (VCDL), a gun-rights organization with 6,000 members.

"I talk to students all the time who are angry that they can't protect themselves. But they don't want to take a chance on getting kicked out," says Philip Van Cleave, president of the VCDL.

But Gilbert's bill never made it past the subcommittee level, in part because it was opposed by the state's universities and by the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police.

In Utah, a similar proposal became law, and it was upheld by the Utah Supreme Court last year despite fierce opposition from officials at the University of Utah. As a result, students 21 or older who have permits can now carry guns on campus and into classrooms. But a new law passed this year allows students to request roommates who do not carry guns.

In other states that have enacted concealed carry laws, including Nebraska, lawmakers have continued to make exemptions that forbid concealed guns on school grounds, in school-owned vehicles, and at school-sponsored events and most athletic competitions.

Gun-control advocates say they'll continue to fight to keep as many guns off campus in as many states as possible.

"Almost every college that has looked at this issue feels they can do a better job of protecting their students by banning guns on campus and taking responsibility to provide good security," says Paul Helmke, president of the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence in Washington. "I'm not sure any campus would like to advertise, 'Come to our campus. We have more guns per capita than any other campus.' "

When the issue is debated again as expected this year in Virginia, gun-control advocates will be lining up with members of the academic community in opposing an expanded presence of guns on campus. They believe the problem is that the country already has too many guns.

"We have access to these weapons, and there are people who get angry, and with that access they will use them," says Jim Sollo, vice president of Virginians Against Handgun Violence, a group with 800 members that advocates gun-control measures. "I fear that we will continue to have mass shootings here in the United States."

But gun advocate Mr. Van Cleave contends that control is not the solution. "Gun control only works with the good guys," he says. "Good people obey the laws. The people you're worried about don't. I don't think [the campus shooting] is going to bode well for gun control."

[Editor's note: *The original subhead misstated where the issue of concealed weapons would be debated.*]

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