



# Implementation Considerations for Policies Permitting Guns on Campus in Kansas

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**In 2013, Kansas became the 11th state to enact a law allowing faculty, staff, and students to carry concealed firearms in campus buildings at public higher education institutions. Termed “campus carry” policies, these laws may explicitly allow guns on college campuses, or they may permit them implicitly by remaining silent on the matter or repealing an existing prohibition. Before this type of legislation was enacted in the United States, only law enforcement and security officials were permitted to carry firearms at public higher education institutions. This brief is one of two resulting from the Urban Institute’s research on a law in Kansas allowing eligible people to carry concealed firearms at public higher education institutions. It explores public university officials’ perceptions of laws allowing guns on campus and offers recommendations to consider during the planning and implementation process associated with similar laws.**

In 2003, Colorado became the first state to enact a law permitting concealed firearms to be carried on campus. Known as the Concealed Carry Act, the law declares that a concealed carry permit is valid “throughout the state,” with no specific exemption for public higher education institutions.<sup>1</sup> In 2004, the Utah Supreme Court ruled that higher education institutions could not ban firearms, making Utah the first state to permit concealed carrying of guns on public campuses as a result of a court interpretation (Bennett, Kraft, and Grubb 2011). Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Idaho, Kansas, Mississippi, Oregon, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin have all passed laws allowing concealed carry on public campuses, with Tennessee only permitting concealed carry for faculty members with permits, excluding students and the general public.<sup>2</sup> Some states allow concealed weapons in all public buildings, while

others prohibit concealed gun carrying in certain places, such as labs and classrooms, student housing, and athletic venues.

Attitudes toward these policies exemplify a nationwide debate concerning gun ownership and possession. The conversation about firearms on public college campuses was renewed by the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, where a student killed 32 students and professors (Lipka 2008). Advocates of concealed carry on campuses reason that an increase in lawful gun ownership will better equip bystanders to intervene in shooting incidents and even deter crime and gun violence. Opponents believe the policy could lead to negative consequences related to campus climate (e.g., academic pressure, increased use of drugs and alcohol, mental health concerns, suicide, and intimidating classroom environments) and broader concerns about concealed carry (e.g., complicating emergency response to shooting incidents, increasing the risk of death when conflicts escalate, and accidental shooting incidents resulting in injury).

## Kansas Legislation Allowing Guns on Campus

In 2013, the Kansas state legislature amended a longstanding law, the Personal and Family Protection Act, allowing eligible people ages 21 and older to carry concealed firearms in most public buildings. This law incorporated a four-year exemption for public higher education institutions, giving campuses until July 1, 2017 to comply with the provisions of the policy. Then, in April 2014, Kansas Governor Samuel Brownback signed HB 2578, barring local governments from enforcing local firearm laws and making gun laws uniform across the state.<sup>3</sup> Both laws further limited campuses' ability to uphold policies that banned guns on campus.

The Kansas Board of Regents, which governs the state's 6 universities and 32 public higher education institutions, gave campuses discretion in formulating their own implementation plans, but stipulated that they follow the guidelines from the state legislature and the board.<sup>4</sup> If universities opposed the policy, they could still prohibit guns from certain buildings if they installed metal detectors, gun lockers, or similar secure storage and staffed security guards at public entrances. Buildings already equipped with the recommended security measures (such as athletic venues) were exempted. Facing budget challenges because of a \$30.7 million cut to the state's higher education system, many universities could not achieve these measures.<sup>5</sup> Only Kansas State University, the University of Kansas, and Wichita State University opted to provide the extra security measures that would enable them to continue prohibiting firearms, and only in select facilities for athletic and other events on a case-by-case basis.

During the period between the enactment of the Personal and Family Protection Act and the expiration of the higher education exemption, student and faculty protests and lobbying against the policy gained national attention.<sup>6</sup> The state legislature removed the permit requirement for concealed firearms in 2015, eliminating the need for licensing, successful completion of an eight-hour safety and instructional training course, and clearance of a background check (this applied to concealed carrying in most public buildings, including higher education institutions). This spurred an effort to repeal the law

through an amendment allowing public university and community college administrators to ban concealed firearms in all campus buildings. Additional provisions were added to include a concealed carry permit component, which reincorporated the training requirement. The bill was also amended to lower the age to obtain a concealed weapon permit from 21 to 18. However, the Kansas House of Representatives reversed these provisions in early 2018. Under current law, people 21 and older are permitted to carry a concealed firearm at public colleges and universities in Kansas. As additional states could pass legislation permitting guns on campuses, more university administrators, state legislators, policymakers, and advocates across the US are turning their attention to the policy's implications for campus safety and the higher education environment.

## Campus Context

The campus environment is unique because it consists mainly of adolescent and young-adult students and has relatively low crime rates compared with surrounding communities. Some argue that college campuses are ill-suited for concealed firearm carrying, claiming that typical college-age people have limited capacity to use guns responsibly (Webster et al. 2016). Research has identified factors associated with young adulthood that heighten the risks of allowing firearms on campuses. The potential for the onset of mental illness during young adulthood paired with the frequency of alcohol and drug consumption and associated violence on campuses compound the risk for serious injury, particularly if firearms are present (Casey 2015; Dreyfuss et al. 2014; Johnson, Blum, and Giedd 2009; Kessler et al. 2006; Swanson et al. 2015). Of the crimes that occur on campuses, property offenses outnumber violent crimes (Barnes 2009; Birnbaum 2013; Doss et al. 2017; Han 2013; Nobles et al. 2012). Fatal attacks on college campuses are rare; a study of violent incidents on campuses from 1990 to 2008 found that, in most cases, victims knew the suspect (Drysdale, Modzeleski, and Simons 2010). Though existing research on campus gun violence provides context, there is a dearth of empirical work on the relationship between crime and legislation allowing concealed guns on campus. Only one study has examined the impact of these policies on crime rates. Using state-level data from 2005 to 2014 and a fixed effects model, Gius (2019) found that these laws are not significantly related to violent or property crimes on campus.

The proportion of students who carry guns on college campuses is small; in a survey of more than 10,000 undergraduates from 119 four-year colleges across the US, just 4.3 percent reported having a working firearm at college. Additionally, 1.6 percent reported having been threatened with a gun on campus (Miller, Hemenway, and Wechsler 2002). In a 2014 survey of 451 students at one university in Missouri (a state without legislation allowing guns on campus), 6.2 percent of students reported carrying a firearm on campus (Jang, Dierenfeldt Jr., and Lee 2014). Despite these relatively low rates of gun carrying and gun violence on college campuses, the lethality of firearms makes laws permitting them on campus (and responses by higher education officials) a pressing issue that warrants further investigation. Indeed, although past research has solicited opinions of faculty and staff about the perceived threat of permitting guns on campus, none has systematically explored the specific plans and implementation processes that were executed in response to the law. The remainder of this brief

provides an account of public university officials' perceptions of the preparation and implementation process associated with Kansas's law permitting guns on campus.

## Methodology

Urban Institute researchers conducted interviews with higher education professionals from public colleges and universities to gather perspectives on the impact of laws allowing guns on campuses and universities' responses to those laws. The interviews were supplemented by a review of the associated policies promulgated by the Kansas Board of Regents, as well as a review of the university-specific policies and planning and implementation timelines, which accorded with the state law and the board's policies. The following sections detail recruitment and data collection procedures as well as sample characteristics.

### Stakeholder Interviews

To understand administrative perspectives and record the variety of institutional responses to laws that permit guns on campus, Urban researchers interviewed 15 public higher education stakeholders in Kansas between August and December 2018. Contact lists were assembled using the websites of public colleges and universities to identify potential respondents based on presumed likelihood of knowledge of or experience with the policy associated with their professional titles. Researchers sent an initial invitation to participate via email and followed up twice by email or phone in the event of no response. The participation rate was about 15 percent; of the 101 people who were invited, 75 did not respond, 11 declined, and 15 ultimately agreed and participated in interviews.

The 15 respondents represented 9 public colleges and universities in Kansas, including 3 community colleges. They included university presidents and vice presidents, deans, a general counsel, police chiefs and other officials tasked with public safety and emergency management on campus, and various administrators and professors who have experience with the law and their institution's efforts to prepare for it to take effect.

The interviews were conducted via phone and lasted between 30 minutes and 1 hour. The interviews were semistructured and based on a protocol covering impacts of the policy (including how the respondent's college or university prepared for the law to take effect), perceptions of the policy before and after implementation, and challenges and benefits associated with the policy. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the data were coded and analyzed using NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software. Urban researchers ran queries to generate reports for each code, and the reports were reviewed and summarized to identify common themes and capture the nuanced range of perspectives.

# Findings

## Stakeholder Interview Themes

Public higher education institutions prepared for the law to take effect by forming committees of university leaders within individual campuses. These committees were charged with developing new university-specific policies to comply with the mandates of the state law and the Kansas Board of Regents. The board released implementation guidance for institutions to consider when creating their specific policies. At the institutional level, university officials were tasked with translating the law into policies tailored to their institution and communicating them to stakeholders on each campus. These findings demonstrate the various levels of organizational involvement and commitment needed to translate the law into approved college- and university-specific policies across the state.

Throughout the policy development process, committees sought legal counsel and guidance from public higher education leaders from other states who had experience with similar laws on their own campuses. Because they anticipated an increase in concealed handgun carrying on campus, universities also outlined policies for concealed carrying in permitted areas and enhanced security measures in gun-free zones to ensure they would remain gun-free when the law went into effect. To equip the university community with comprehensive knowledge of the policy, universities also held training and information sessions for faculty, staff, and students. Universities invested considerable resources in the planning and implementation process, and many respondents cited budget constraints as an obstacle to implementing policies that would maximize safety on campus.

Despite the two years that campuses had to prepare for the law to be implemented, universities faced several challenges related to (1) creating campus-specific policies, (2) addressing the law's security requirements, (3) informing and training the campus community on the law, and (4) engaging the campus community throughout the planning and implementation process.

### DESIGNING UNIVERSITY-SPECIFIC POLICIES TO RESPOND TO KANSAS'S CAMPUS GUN LAW

**Planning and implementation committees.** Interviewees reported spending significant time and resources preparing university-specific policies and gathering in committees of university council members, vice presidents, finance officials, students, campus police, academic department directors, and legal officials. The time that staff spent serving on these committees was costly for two reasons. First, planning and implementation committees met for over a year for multiple rounds of revision and voting on the policies, policies concerning issues ranging from responses to guns in classrooms and shared living spaces to the security measures required for designating an area as a gun-free zone. Second, administrators tasked with making decisions on these committees were among those with the highest positions of leadership on campus. As such, they were faced with a significant opportunity cost; they reported that the time they spent in these planning activities interfered with their primary duties and responsibilities.

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*That's the 11 highest-paid people at the institution sitting there talking ... we spent an inordinate amount of time on this.*

—University representative

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Committees were charged with creating policies tailored to their universities' respective environments, which varied according to physical infrastructure, available security measures, budgetary constraints, and the diversity of university community members and their concerns regarding the presence of guns on campus. Though this contributed to the complexity of the planning and implementation process, colleges and universities benefited from the long lead time between the law's enactment and its implementation, a period that allowed for thoughtful planning.

**Collaboration with legal professionals and other higher education institutions.** Interviewees who were on these planning and implementation committees stressed how important it was for their institutions to collaborate with other public universities and consult with legal experts to comprehensively understand how the law would impact their campus and the changes required to ensure compliance with the law. Committees sought legal counsel on various issues, including the conditions in which police could intervene in situations involving concealed handgun carrying, the university's role of regulating where, how, and when firearms can be carried, and the potential for liability issues should gun violence occur. Some public universities used in-house attorneys, whereas others consulted external legal professionals.

#### GUN CARRYING IN CAMPUS SPACES AND INCREASED SECURITY MEASURES

**Variation across campus spaces.** The committees outlined provisions to address concealed handgun carrying in academic buildings and student residential facilities. Interviewees discussed their concerns about students carrying guns in their backpacks in classrooms and labs. One university official emphasized the feasibility of accessing a handgun in a backpack and considered requiring a latch on handgun holsters to prevent them from accidentally firing inside classrooms. Interviewees also reported that students expressed anxiety about concealed handguns in shared living spaces, such as university-owned residential facilities. In response, universities provided guidance to students on how to handle situations in which they felt uncomfortable with their roommates' possession of handguns. In addition to guidance, several universities established policies that require handguns to be secured in an approved gun safe inside dorm rooms. Among universities without on-campus housing, some prohibited gun storage altogether.

**Increased security in gun-free zones.** Some on-campus facilities could not be designated as gun-free zones because of their numerous points of entry and the associated costs of the required additional security measures (the law requires buildings disallowing concealed handguns to have metal detectors, security personnel staffed at each entrance, or signs prohibiting guns). Furthermore, in preparation for

the policy to take effect, universities were required to display signs in all buildings explaining the concealed-handgun-carrying policy. Other universities chose to hire additional security personnel and reassigned existing security staff to open spaces on campus to increase presence and responsiveness to calls for service received by the police department. Interviewees expressed that purchasing additional security technology and staffing additional security personnel were significant financial burdens that required planning and implementation committees to carefully consider which parts of campus should disallow concealed gun carrying.

Administrators often prioritized exemptions from the law for childcare facilities, athletic events, commencement ceremony venues, and events with prominent speakers. Interviewees emphasized the importance of prioritizing athletic venues as gun-free zones because they wanted to preserve a family-friendly environment where spectators would continue to feel safe. Because they are large and have multiple entrances, athletic venues posed the largest financial burden to universities. Certain universities had portable metal detectors and restricted access to make implementation at such venues feasible and affordable. One interviewee cited the cost of these changes in infrastructure as reaching “upwards of several million, if we wanted to do that on each of our campuses.”

#### COMMUNICATION AND TRAINING IN PREPARATION FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Planning and implementation committees worked to ensure that campus community members and visitors were knowledgeable about the details of the law before implementation and felt comfortable and safe on campus postimplementation.

**Communication before and after implementation.** Before the law was implemented, Kansas universities prioritized gathering input and addressing questions and concerns from campus community members. The goal was to use this feedback to inform provisions in university-specific policies. Universities used various methods—online surveys, town hall meetings, community open forums, meetings between administrative leadership and faculty, staff members, and students—to solicit input from all affected stakeholders. Universities also sought guidance from states with similar existing laws on best practices for receiving community feedback and incorporating it into their policies.

Once the law was fully implemented, universities used a wide array of methods to inform their campus communities about the policy, including informational workshops, videos, and handouts during new-student orientation and at the beginning of the first academic year following implementation. The content of outreach to students included detailed information about the state law and the university-specific policies surrounding concealed handgun carrying, financial assistance and training resources for those who planned to carry concealed handguns, and the steps universities had taken to navigate the shift in culture, particularly in student residential facilities, academic buildings, and athletic venues.

**Faculty, staff, and student training.** Universities also invested resources in training staff before full implementation of the policy. Staff training was conducted for university faculty, security personnel, and facility and custodial staff. Attendees were encouraged to ask questions and openly discuss their levels of understanding and comfort with the policy. Interviewees reported preparing panels, informational videos, and assemblies to train faculty and staff. Furthermore, interviewees explained

that faculty trainings heavily emphasized skills and techniques for cultivating safe classroom environments while maintaining the quality and effectiveness of teaching.

Postimplementation, many universities hosted specialized trainings for campus police, mental health professionals, faculty and staff, and students. The types of university organizations that created the training curriculum and hosted training sessions also varied. Some interviewees reported that trainings were hosted by teaching centers and campus police, and others reported that student governments took initiative to host trainings alongside offices of diversity and equity. Campus police were briefed on the legal ramifications of the law and incorporated active shooter drills into their training. Universities also invested more resources into counseling services and provided training to those interested in learning more about how they could assist students, faculty, staff, and campus community members in the event of a crisis.

### CHALLENGES ENGAGING CAMPUS COMMUNITY MEMBERS DURING PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Respondents reported that their universities faced several challenges engaging subsets of the campus community before and after implementation of the law, as well as in addressing various responses to the law's enactment. Some university officials mentioned that poor attendance at information and feedback sessions posed a significant barrier to effectively communicating the policy's details and engaging in dialogue with community members about their concerns for safety on campus. Though small groups of people on some campuses were interested in attending sessions to discuss and learn about the policy's potential impact on their universities, other campuses observed low engagement in response to attempts to solicit input.

Other respondents reported feeling that they had received insufficient resources and guidance to address the safety concerns of underrepresented student groups who already felt vulnerable on campus before the law. Some university officials conveyed that planning and implementation committees reached out to these groups to better understand their concerns, which were exacerbated by the potential for concealed handguns on campus. After engaging in dialogue with these students, university officials noted a decrease in anxiety and distress related to the law. However, interviewees emphasized that discomfort with guns on campus, although diminished following implementation, persisted among underrepresented student groups.

Many university officials mentioned that information sessions responded to community members' safety concerns by focusing on the legislative requirements of the policy. They also highlighted the universities' efforts to oppose the legislation to demonstrate that they were sympathetic to safety concerns associated with a law requiring colleges to allow guns on campus. Despite their lack of success, the universities expressed confidence in their ability to educate their campuses on the policy while prioritizing both public safety and the concerns of the campus community.

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*We had a pretty good understanding of what to expect, and the education piece helped ... We targeted those people that we could help the most to understand that we're adhering to the law ... and we're still here to make sure everybody understands it and is safe.*

–University official

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By reminding concerned groups that this was not a university-level decision but a state law that campuses were required to implement, interviewees reported that students, faculty, and staff were better able to engage in constructive feedback to generate solutions for tackling the anticipated negative shifts in campus climate. Though engaging students was challenging, respondents stressed the importance of creative outreach methods to target concerned student groups who wanted to learn more about the implications of laws allowing guns on campus and how their university was working to address them.

## Takeaways and Policy Implications

The findings described in this brief point to three key takeaways and policy recommendations, all of which are relevant for university officials to consider during the planning and implementation process for state laws allowing guns on campus.

***First, creating university-specific policies regulating guns on campus required extensive internal and external collaboration, and universities faced challenges investing resources in this process while also prioritizing the campus community's well-being.*** Planning and implementation committees used the time between the law's enactment and its implementation to draft university-specific policies, plan for implementation, and collaborate with other universities and outside legal resources. Interviewees highlighted the complexity of this process, reiterating that it was multilayered and required consideration of the state law, the mandates put forth by the Kansas Board of Regents, and the specific criteria that policies and procedures on individual campuses had to meet. Moreover, planning and implementation committees grappled with budget considerations related to creating the policy and seeking outside legal advice. Interviewees recognized the benefits of collaborating with other public higher education institutions as they determined the content of university-specific policies while working with limited resources.

**Recommendation 1:** Universities should collaborate with other public higher education institutions and legal professionals who can help them develop plans for their specific policies. It is imperative that universities designate funding for training and legal advice during the policy planning and implementation process. Through collaboration, universities can receive guidance on the law's budget implications from those that have implemented it through a multilayered and complex implementation structure.

***Second, universities were faced with the difficult task of modifying security policies and procedures regarding concealed handgun carrying in different campus spaces, and because some spaces required additional security measures, this was a considerable resource investment given limited budgets.*** Though all public higher education institutions in Kansas were required to comply with the law, the law did not provide institutions financial assistance to cover implementation costs. For this reason, university officials were faced with the delicate task of balancing the safety needs and concerns of their university with what was possible given their budget. Interviewees shared that limited funding for additional security personnel and equipment prevented them from prohibiting guns across the majority of spaces on campus, with the exception of athletic venues, which were already equipped with adequate security personnel and equipment. Because they could not prevent concealed handgun carrying in all of the areas they wanted to designate as gun-free, committees worked to provide guidance to faculty, staff, and students about how to handle the presence of guns in classrooms and student residential facilities. They also strategized the best use of resources by rerouting security personnel and law enforcement to increase their presence in areas where guns were permitted.

**Recommendation 2:** New laws allowing guns on campus should afford affected institutions ample time for planning and preparation. University leaders will benefit from having time to thoughtfully assess the unique security needs of areas across campus where the presence of concealed handguns could significantly compromise the safety of students, faculty, staff, and visitors. As such, universities aspiring to prohibit guns in certain areas should develop criteria for modifying security policies, procedures, and infrastructure, and prioritize funding accordingly.

***Third, university officials worked extensively before and after implementation (using a variety of methods) to alleviate concerns and ensure the campus community was well-informed of the university-specific policies and procedures regulating guns on campus.*** Furthermore, university officials faced challenges engaging campus subgroups during the planning and implementation process and felt ill-equipped to do so in some situations. Universities used feedback from students, faculty, and staff to inform targeted training curricula for various groups within the university, such as new and returning students, campus police, campus mental health professionals, and faculty and teaching staff. Through communication and training, universities were better able to demonstrate efforts taken to minimize the anticipated negative shifts in the campus culture and learning environment, in hopes of making those who were initially concerned feel safer.

Several university officials shared that many students, faculty, and staff were unaware of how the policy would impact their campus and had limited engagement with discussions about the policy as a result. On the other hand, university officials did not feel equipped to address the concerns of students of marginalized groups who reported feeling unsafe or unwelcome on campus, even before the law was enacted. Some universities targeted their outreach to these student groups and ultimately reported that their fear and discomfort decreased after gaining more comprehensive knowledge of the policy's legal necessity and the measures put in place for their safety on campus. This underscores the importance of communicating this policy early and frequently, particularly with marginalized groups to

gain a comprehensive understanding of their concerns and recommendations for how the university can address them.

**Recommendation 3:** When planning for laws permitting guns on campus to take effect, university leaders must use the lead time (if given) between the enactment of the law and its implementation to develop strategies for addressing stakeholders' anxieties and concerns, particularly those of subpopulations who may feel most at risk of victimization as a result of such laws. These strategies should include targeted, frequent outreach and training about the policy before and after implementation. Careful consideration should be given to communication methods to ensure such concerns are adequately addressed.

After Kansas passed a law permitting firearms on campus, university leaders faced challenges during the planning and implementation process. In response, university administrators were creative in identifying and prioritizing resources needed to create university-specific policies that complied with the law while ensuring campus safety. They saw the value in collaborating with other leaders in higher education and legal experts as they navigated a complex and multilayered implementation structure involving state law, the Kansas Board of Regents, and input from university community members. Working with limited budgets, planning and implementation committees evaluated the security needs of buildings across campus, sought input from faculty, staff, and students regarding their concerns about safety, and provided guidance on how to handle the presence of guns on campus. Although it was difficult to engage campus subgroups, university leaders persistently communicated with the community before and after implementation to ensure all were educated about the law and its potential impacts on campus. Despite facing obstacles, university leaders benefited from the lead time before the law took effect. With that time, they were able to allocate resources to (1) receive guidance on developing plans for university-specific policies, (2) address security needs across campus, and (3) engage with and solicit recommendations from people who had anxieties about the policy. The three lessons learned by stakeholders in Kansas and presented as takeaways in this brief can inform higher-education leaders in other states where legislators are considering or have passed similar laws.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> David Kopel, "Guns on University Campuses: The Colorado Experience," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/04/20/guns-on-university-campuses-the-colorado-experience/?noredirect=on&utm\\_term=.b4195611ad27](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/volokh-conspiracy/wp/2015/04/20/guns-on-university-campuses-the-colorado-experience/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.b4195611ad27).
- <sup>2</sup> "Guns on Campus: Overview," National Conference of State Legislatures, August, 14, 2018, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/guns-on-campus-overview.aspx>.
- <sup>3</sup> Bryan Lowry, "Kansas Governor Signs Gun Legislation," *Wichita Eagle*, April 23, 2014, <https://www.kansas.com/news/politics-government/article1140958.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> "About Us," Kansas Board of Regents, accessed March 8, 2018, <https://www.kansasregents.org/about>.
- <sup>5</sup> "What's the Matter with Kansas Budget Cuts?" *Inside Higher Ed*, May 23, 2016, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2016/05/23/kansas-cuts-criticized-hurting-large-research-universities>.
- <sup>6</sup> James Hoyt, "The Surprising Ways Activists Are Protesting against – and for – Campus Carry," *USA Today*, October 7, 2016, <https://www.usatoday.com/story/college/2016/10/07/the-surprising-ways-activists-are-protesting-against-and-for-campus-carry/37422095/>.

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