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CAMPUS CRIME , GUNS AND GUN LAWS

Guns on campus - More peril than protection

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The Arizona legislature passed a measure yesterday that would force colleges and universities in the state to allow properly-licensed students and staff to carry firearms -- concealed or in open view -- while walking or driving through campus. If signed by Governor Janice Brewer, a supporter of gun-owner rights, Arizona will join Utah in redefining the notion of marksmanship on campus. It is no longer just about grades.

As compromise to opponents in the state senate, the Arizona bill was strategically narrowed from an earlier version that would also have permitted concealed firearms in dorms, classrooms and other campus buildings. Meanwhile, lawmakers in the similarly gun-lovin' state of Texas are continuing to deliberate on such a broad proposal.

The shifting tide in at least one corner of America is a victory for Students for Concealed Carry, a national organization formed after the 2007 Virginia Tech massacre. But many faculty see it as the makings of a hostile workplace. How comfortable would instructors be in handing out poor grades to students who may be packing heat? No wonder that the faculties at all three state universities in Arizona overwhelmingly voiced opposition to the guns-on-campus bill. Apparently, their voice of reason and concern was trumped by those calling for unrestricted gun rights.

Notwithstanding debate over the scope of the Second Amendment, it is important to consider the risks and benefits of permitting an armed campus. Although the interest of some in feeling protected against an armed assailant is clearly understandable, the likelihood of such incidents is remarkably remote.

On average, fewer than 20 homicides occur annually on college campuses around the country. Without minimizing the gravity of any loss of life, this annual victim count is out of the tens of millions who study or work at institutions of higher education. Those who seek to enhance the safety and well-being of students would be better advised to advocate for increased resources for preventing binge drinking, drug overdoses as well as suicides, which together claim the lives of thousands of college students every year.

Given the low incidence of serious violence on campus and the high prevalence of substance abuse and depression among college students, it makes little sense to encourage gun carrying by anyone other than duly-sworn public safety personnel.

It is an unfortunate fact that college campuses are not violence-free. For that matter, few places are. Perhaps Arizonans who are so worried about personal safety that they would want to study with gun at hand should explore the risk-free alternative: an online degree from the University of Phoenix.