



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

CAMPUS CRIME , GUNS AND GUN LAWS

Probe academic record, not criminal record

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When a student at the MassBay Community College was arrested last winter for having a loaded semiautomatic weapon inside his backpack, we were all relieved that no one was harmed. But as more details surfaced indicating that the student had had a substantial criminal record, the relief turned to outrage. How could such a dangerous individual be admitted as a student?

As a long-time and consistent opponent of allowing guns on college campuses (with the exception of those issued to duly-sworn campus police), you might think I too would be outraged. You might think I'd join the vocal crowd, including *Globe* columnist [Derrick Jackson](#) and those at the *Globe's* [Editorial Board](#), to insist that community colleges, like their four-year counterparts, probe applicants concerning their criminal pasts. Well, think again.

The fact of the matter is that MassBay and other community colleges are not comparable to various public and private colleges offering four-year programs. Sure, the 15 community colleges in Massachusetts have classrooms, libraries and cafeterias. But they don't have dormitories.

Residential campuses, by contrast, have a special responsibility of caring for their student populations around the clock, not just while they are in class or studying at the library. As such, questions about criminal history and careful case-by-case decisions about their implications for admissions can be defended for traditional four-year schools that take over where parents leave off.

This does not mean, of course, that we should be unconcerned about safety on the campuses of community colleges. To the contrary, various security measures, including lighting and video surveillance, are quite appropriate, perhaps even necessary. But background checks go beyond what is reasonable in balancing public safety and personal privacy.

How different is a cafeteria at Massasoit Community College and a McDonald's in downtown Brockton? Should background checks be required before ordering a Big Mac?

Sure, there is a library at Bunker Hill Community College, but so is there a branch of the Boston Public Library in Charlestown. Should a criminal history review be a prerequisite for obtaining a library card?

Perhaps there is something special about a classroom -- a relatively confined space where a gun-toting student could target classmates like fish in a barrel. □ But the same holds for classes at the Boston Center for Adult Ed and at Weight Watchers. Moreover, part-time degree programs at Northeastern, Harvard, BU and other universities in the area require little more than a tuition check in order to register for part-time evening classes. For that matter, graduate school applicants to the state university system are spared inquiries about their past transgressions.

Let's not lose sight of the vital role that community colleges play in giving students with less than stellar backgrounds a second chance. Denying them that opportunity would, in the long run, do far more harm than good.

Of course, any student found in possession of a gun at school, as in the MassBay incident, should lose the right to have that second chance. But denying thousands of others for the sins of a few makes very little sense and very bad public policy.