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Safety First: Open Carry Firearms on Higher Education Campuses in Arizona

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Much has been made in the past few years about gun restrictions in the U.S. Proponents of gun regulation are in a constant state of lobbying for state and federal bills that restrict access to firearms, whether that takes the form of more extensive background checks on potential gun owners or longer waiting periods before guns may be sold to individuals. On the other side, the National Rifle Association (NRA) and other like-minded individuals advocate for looser restrictions on the sale and carrying of firearms. For these supporters of pro-gun legislation, owning and carrying guns is a fundamental right—even a civil right. While this national debate continues to loom over the hot topic of guns, there are breaking news stories, especially within the last few months, that bring this fundamental debate to the threshold of our nations colleges, high schools, even elementary schools. Seung-Hui Cho's massacre at Virginia Tech (April 16, 2007) is perhaps one of the more infamous school shootings, but there are others that are perhaps more difficult to remember, like the deaths of 27 killed at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newton, Connecticut (December 14, 2012) (CNN, 2015). Shootings like these in educational settings have drawn attention from both anti-gun proponents and pro-gun lobbyists, and the State of Arizona is no exception to this firestorm. The Arizona State legislature has proposed SB 1474, a gun bill that will allow students and faculty to carry guns on the campus grounds of its three state-funded universities. Supporters of the bill claim that Arizona is an open carry state, and those rights should not be restricted simply because the carrier crosses the border of a college campus. Those against the bill assert that guns have no place in education and that those who support the bill are only after their own election-year agendas. While the Second Amendment should be upheld, the educational learning environment should be protected;

therefore, SB 1474 is a detrimental and dangerous bill that has the potential to change the university campus culture in Arizona state universities.

The Literature Review

In order to better understanding the origins of SB1474 and the controversy that surrounds it, the history of gun violence in school settings must be taken into account; therefore, a brief look at some of the events of the past few decades is presented. Further, this review will examine in greater detail the positions of the two sides of the controversy, beginning with the pro-SB1474 side, which is in favor of allowing open carry on all Arizona state-funded campuses. Then the position of those against SB1474 will be presented; again, this con side is arguing for Arizona campuses to remain as they are now: a place without firearms.

A Brief Look at Gun Violence in Schools

The topic of gun control in educational environments exploded in 1999 when Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold walked into a virtually unknown high school in Littleton, CO, and killed twelve students and one teacher (Gibbs and Roche, 1999). Questions of how such events could occur and concerns about the violence of which teens and young adults are capable became the concern of pressured administrators and horrified parents in big cities and small towns alike. A string of school gun-centered violence followed over the next few years. Perhaps most striking though was the way in which this one incident changed the culture of America: clear backpacks, more metal detectors, and (of course) fear. Cloud (1999) points out some of the extreme, “zero tolerance” actions taken by schools shortly following the Columbine shootings:

A seven-year-old boy in Cahokia, Ill., is suspended for having a nail clipper at school. A 10th-grader at Surry County High School in Virginia is booted for having blue-dyed hair.

A Minnesota high school nixes a yearbook photo of an Army enlistee in the senior class because it shows her sitting atop a cannon outside a Veterans of Foreign Wars post.

Far from the exception, these actions considered these many years later seem unreasonable, even in a post-9/11 world filled with uncertainty.

The Argument for Open Carry Everywhere in Arizona

However, in Arizona, the newly proposed SB 1474 would not seek to disarm students; on the contrary, the bill would allow students the right to concealed carry on state-funded university campuses. Proponents of the bill assert that such a measure is long over due. According to an NRA poster that were taped to message boards all over The University of Arizona campus, “[s]elf-defense is one of the most fundamental rights of every human being.” Further, the poster states that the NRA has worked diligently over the past 25 years to expand the right of open carry: the NRA has been “working for passage of fair Right-to-Carry laws, expansion of carry reciprocity between the states and the elimination of many ‘no-carry’ zones that only affect the law-abiding.” For the NRA, one of the major private-public backers of the SB 1474, the restriction of concealed carry on college campuses is an infringement on these basic rights. The flyer goes on to state the following:

Those who oppose campus carry [of firearms] argue that educational institutions should be treated differently, based on emotional claims that places of higher learning are somehow exempt from real-world violence. But the truth is, despite current prohibitions on legally carrying on campuses, crimes already occur on campus, and the right to self-defense from those violent acts should be respected. (NRA, 2012)

The NRA is correct. In fact, given the number of school-related shootings in the past few months alone, it would seem that a student’s chances of being shot on campus seem greater than if that

same student were walking the streets of the community. From larger cities to small towns, it seems that the size of the community does not matter: the violence of a shooting can occur anywhere. However, even with this fact floating in the backs of students' minds, students must still attend classes and while it would seem obvious that lawmakers on both sides want student safety, they just see the means to that safety from different sides of the same coin.

The Case for Campuses as Unique

Eugene Sander (2012), the Interim President of the University of Arizona, released the following statement about SB 1474: "I have been a gun owner for all my adult life, and am fully supportive of the right to own a gun. However, having faculty, staff or students bringing weapons into classrooms and other campus activities will do nothing to make our campus safer." While Sander does not go into detail about what this newly proposed bill does have to do with, he makes his case on the basis that 50,000 students, staff, and faculty attend the campus daily, along with over 20,000 visitors annually. For Sander (2015), the educational environment is a "unique atmosphere that is dependent on open and vigorous debate. Introducing guns into classrooms would dramatically and negatively impact the ability to engage in constructive dialogue." In other words, even if the NRA does not believe that the university is a unique atmosphere, as Sander and others do, then there is still a possibility that introducing the right to carry concealed weapons on campus might lead to a change to the very culture of the university.

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