

## Here's how higher education can play a role in preventing mass shootings: Thomas P. Foley

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Thomas P. Foley (Mount Aloysius College photo)

During a recent address to our college community, I recounted the challenge that President Barack Obama issued to the nation after the attempted murder of former U.S. Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, D-Ariz., in 2011.

In the wake of Giffords shooting in Tuscon, Ariz., Obama called on Americans to "expand our moral imaginations, to listen to each other more carefully, to sharpen our instincts for empathy and remind ourselves all the ways our hopes and dreams are bound together."

The attack that critically wounded Giffords also claimed six other lives. They included a nine-year-old girl and a grandmother celebrating her celebrating her 40th wedding anniversary.

Though I'd gotten fairly used to violent attacks on the representatives of a democratic society when I spent two years as a peace worker in a war-torn country, I was stunned that such an attack took place in my own country.

Recently, a series of similar incidents have, simultaneously, showcased the worst in our society (the perpetrators) while bringing out the best (the first responders).

In the past few months, we have seen mass shootings that left nine dead in a church in Charleston, S.C.; four Marines and a soldier killed in attacks on military facilities in Chattanooga; two dead and nine injured in another movie theater shooting, this time in Louisiana, and at least five more fatal attacks on college campuses.

And that is just the tip of the iceberg.

There were 18 mass shootings in April this year, 39 in May, 41 in June and another 34 in July.

At one point, a news organization that has tracked mass shootings nationwide (a macabre assignment if I ever heard one) reported that on the 291st day of the year, there had been exactly 294 mass shootings in our country. They defined such incidents as any where four or more people are injured or killed).

Our own recent encounter with a potential "active shooter" (a student who came onto our weapons-free campus with two guns and back up ammo) was disturbing for many in our community.

Thanks to alert students and a textbook response, that threat was quickly defused.

But as we view the carnage from such places as Umpqua Community College in Oregon (and at the multiple institutions that have suffered "active shooters" since then), it occurs to me that we got off light.

That doesn't mean we don't have a role to play in addressing those situations.

After the Giffords shooting, we talked on our campus about the role that we in education play in the march to a more civil society.

Critical thinking, the ability to listen, to analyze, to form ideas and to communicate them—these are all skills fundamental to both education and democracy.

And for many, the school building is where we learn these skills.

There, we can providing a safe, respectful environment that allows for opinions to be shared (and the holder of an opinion to feel safe), by encouraging the careful consideration of complex issues and by, in effect, giving students a nurturing environment to test their democratic skills.

At their best, school buildings are incubators for democracy. They're where all the skills are taught, all the behaviors are modeled so that when students take up their responsibilities as "citizens," they have the tools needed to make democracy work.

As educators, we are fortunate to have the training to think critically every day, the luxury to read "widely and deeply" on the issues of the day. And we have the time to share our insights with our students who will take our lessons home to their families.

The bottom line is that we in education don't have the kind of first-hand role in stopping these mass shootings that legislators, first responders and others do.

But as educators, we have a very special role to play in society to bring out the best and not the worst in our citizenry.

I am convinced that all of us in education have a significant role to play in ending the intolerance that seems to be at the heart of so many of these incidents by:

- Enhancing our students' ability to think critically
- Modeling civil dialogue on complicated issues
- Teaching good citizenship through the pursuit of the common good
- Inculcating a commitment to community
- Encouraging openness to the "other" in our classrooms and society and
- Helping our students develop their own "voices."

All of these tools, in whose development educators do have a first-hand role, will help empower students to engage constructively with their fellow citizens.

This happens by encouraging civil discourse, by promoting a commitment to community and by developing the capacity for critical thinking.

These are the very tools that can help transcend the kind of intolerance that bred the Tucson shooting--and the thousands of other similar incidents since then.

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