

Campus protest held to encourage disarming the police

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As night settles, police cars circle the campus, looking for any signs of intruders, thieves or disruption. Students at UNC Asheville, show ambivalent about police presence on campus, specifically their authority to possess firearms.

The Student Action Coalition held a rally about disarming campus police in front of Ramsey Library on Oct. 16.

Eric Boyce, UNCA police chief, said the department does not spend a large amount of money on weapons.

"We don't purchase weapons every year. We haven't purchased weapons probably in about four years now," Boyce said. "When we talk about disarming police and using that money, we're not talking about a lot of money. We're probably talking about less than \$3,000 a year."

Though weapons are not an annual purchase, Boyce said the department purchases ammunition often.

Beck Martens, member of the Student Action Coalition, explained the significance of disarming the police.

Martens said the goal is to disarm campus police.

"Not just disarming, but also divesting from further campus police hires and divesting from further campus weapons purchases. With all of that money that's saved, because that's a lot of money that goes into these hires and weapons, it would be reinvesting into mental health care."

The SAC hopes to distribute the money invested in weapons purchases and repurpose the money towards the health center. Page Nevel, member of the SAC, said going through a mental health crisis in public can result in a response from the police.

"We know statistically, if you are a person of color you are more likely to face fatal encounters with police," Nevel said. "It's very similar for someone who has mental health



PHOTO BY NICK HASELOFF

Page Nevel poses with a sign protesting police brutality in front of Ramsey Library on Oct. 16.

crises in public. So if somebody's going through suicidal or dissociation or mental health crises in a public space, they're read as apparently violent. And often people's response is to call police both on campus and off of campus."

The discussion of the correlation between police and mental health was prompted by the shooting of Scout Schultz, Martens said.

Schultz was a student at Georgia Tech, fatally shot by campus police while holding a knife when they were suicidal. Videos of this incident quickly spread around the internet.

"It was their action to disarm campus police to completely divest from campus police," Martens said.

Martens said that regardless of the fact that the police had firearms, there was no evidence or public policy documents saying they could use those weapons.

Schultz's death raised the question of whether or not campus police have the right to discharge a weapon. The North Carolina General Statute 15a-401 states the po-

lice have the right to use force in circumstances which call for it.

"We statutorily have authority, should a situation and circumstances arise, that deadly force is being used," Boyce said. "And that use of deadly force can prevent the loss of life of others. We are authorized to use that."

Although police have the ability to use force in the event it is necessary, the North Carolina Statute maintains extreme or unreasonable force cannot be justified. The UNCA police have levels of responding before using lethal force, Boyce said.

"The first level of force is presence. Just your presence should deter anyone from using force. The second level of force going up that continuum is verbal. So we show up and that doesn't help the problem, then we ask folks to comply. Voluntary compliance is always our preferred method of enforcement," Boyce said. "We arm our officers with a variety of different tools and techniques that they can deploy to prevent them from automatically

going from presence to the use of deadly force."

Moving forward in the conversation about disarming the police, Boyce said the campus police are open to listening.

"We don't have all the answers and I think if we can look at the news on any given day and understand that we have some work to do as a profession. So we want to understand how our community wants to be policed and to the extent possible police in a way that's appropriate, effective and reduces any fear or concern that the police will act inappropriately."

The SAC, campus police and other influential campus figures in this discussion plan to meet, Martens said.

"We've been in communication with the main folks that we're talking to, so campus police, the Dean of students, Health and Counseling. We're planning to have a meeting next week," Martens said. "We're trying to get as many students who want to talk to administration about this."