

HONE YOUR SAFETY AWARENESS

Experts share campus safety tips that should be on the radar of every first-year college student

By JESSICA MILCETICH
McClatchy-Tribune

It's your first semester at college, and chances are it's the first time you've been away from home for an extended period of time. You want to hang out with friends, go to parties and explore the new world of opportunities that is available to you. But there are safety risks that go along with being on your own.

To help protect yourself, we talked to experts from campuses all over the country to find out what you can do to avoid some of the dangers associated with many common college situations. Our guide gives you tips and advice you can use to stay safe and still have a good time.

NIGHT SAFETY

Whether you're walking back from a late-night study session or coming home from a hard night of partying, campus can be a completely different place when the sun sets. Students can decrease their chances of being victims of crime at night by following these tips.

- Get to know your campus and the services available, says Jon Ahola, the director of public safety at Michigan Technological Institute, in Houghton. Most schools have some form of a shuttle service or an escort service that operates at night to get students home safely.

- Know where the emergency phones are and keep your cell phone in your hand in case you need to use it quickly, Ahola says.

- Keep your keys in your hand so you don't waste time digging in your purse or pockets to find them. They also can make a good weapon if necessary, Ahola says.

- Travel in groups when you can, says Steven Healy, the president of the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators and director of public safety at Princeton University, in New Jersey. "There's safety in numbers."

- Pay attention to areas that could be safe havens. Look for areas or buildings with lots of people if you need to duck in somewhere quickly, says Jerry Matthews, the director of public safety and emergency management for Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, in Troy, N.Y.

AT A PARTY

It's a common college experience — students are going to go out, drink and have a good time. If you're a freshman new to the party scene, follow this advice to keep safe when you're out and about.

- Go out in groups, especially if you're a female, Healy says. Go to the party and make sure you leave the party with all the members of your group.

- Watch out for your friends at the party. If it looks like they've had too much to drink, make sure they don't accept any other drinks people may offer them, Healy says.

- Make sure you know where your drink came from, Healy says. Don't drink it if you didn't pour it yourself.

- Have a game plan before you leave, Matthews says. Set a fixed number of drinks (whether it be zero or three) for yourself and stick to it. Before you leave for the party, plan what you will say if you are offered more drinks than you want.

CAMPUS EMERGENCY

After the tragedy at Virginia Tech, many schools are re-evaluating their emergency response plans. Should there be an emergency situation on your campus, here are some rules to follow:

- First, make sure campus authorities can notify you of any potential problems, Healy says. Many campuses are implementing programs that send alerts via e-mail and text messages. If your campus offers the service, sign up.

- Have emergency numbers programmed into your cell phone, including campus security, Healy says.

- If you're in a building with a shooter, lock and/or barricade the door and call 911, Ahola says.

- If you're in an open space and have to run from a shooter, stagger your directions, he adds. You'll be harder to hit than something moving in a straight line.

- Follow the advice your school is giving, Healy says. They may need you to stay in your dorm room, or they may need to evacuate the entire building.

THEFT PROTECTION

With our cell phones, iPods and BlackBerrys, we've become a society that's in love with our hand-held devices. They're small, portable and carry all the information we need. But their size makes them easy targets for theft. On a campus with tons of new people, leaving your backpack on your seat while you make a bathroom run could be a costly mistake. The pros offer some suggestions on how to reduce your chances of being a victim of theft.

- Keep your dorm room door locked at all times, Ahola says. No matter how long you're going to be gone — even if you are just going to the bathroom — shut and lock the door. Don't leave your property unattended in libraries or lecture halls either. Thieves are opportunists; if they see something sitting unprotected, they will be more likely to snatch it, Matthews says.

- Secure your laptop with a lock and inscribe an identification number on your other small devices, Ahola says. These ID numbers make items hard to re-sell, Healy says.

- For expensive items, there are tags, such as the STOP ID tracking tag by Secure It (\$25, www.secure-it.com). These are difficult to remove from the items, Healy says, but if the tag is taken off, it leaves an unnoticeable identification that can be tracked if the item is stolen.

RELATIONSHIP VIOLENCE

According to a 1996 study, one in five college students experience some type of relationship violence in the form of physical, economic, emotional or sexual abuse, and those numbers still hold true today, says Shalise Bates-Pratt, the director of student leadership and the Women's Resource Center at Randolph-Macon College, in Ashland, Va. By being aware of some red flags, you could protect yourself or a friend from being a victim of an abusive relationship.

- If someone has a past history of multiple failed relationships, it may not be a sign of an abuser, but it should at least pique interest, she says. You should wonder why so many of the person's other relationships failed.

- Trying to downplay past violence is a definite red flag. Saying things like, "I used to hit my girlfriend, but she aggravated me," is a sign that this person could abuse you, Bates-Pratt says.

- Look for outright threats of violence and more subtle signs as well. If a partner threatens to tell an embarrassing story or share private information in exchange for something, that behavior could lead to worse problems, she adds.

- The tendencies to break things, throw things or grab you physically during arguments are all signs that point to an abuser.

- Controlling behavior (constant phone calls and text messages and showing up unannounced) as well as jealousy and not allowing you to hang out with other people could signal the potential for abusive behavior.

- For students who know others who are in a relationship that they suspect is abusive, Bates-Pratt recommends speaking with your friend in private, in a nonconfrontational manner. Express your concern and make your friend aware of resources that are available. However, do not give your friend a business card or flier that the abuser could find sitting around. This has the potential to cause the behavior to escalate.

- The Red Flag Campaign Web site (www.theredflagcampaign.org) has a list of resources if you or a friend is the victim of relationship violence.



ILLUSTRATIONS BY ERIC GOODWIN AND TIM GOEHN/MCT