Campus recovery from the shootings at Virginia Tech in April has, in part, been supported by a process of community building launched at the institution years ago. Terry Wildman, director of the Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching, explains.

Sustaining Academic Community in the Aftermath of Tragedy

By Terry M. Wildman

I T WAS ONLY A DAY after the tragedy at Virginia Tech when poet Nikki Giovanni captured in a few words the powerful message "We will prevail." In the following weeks, it became commonplace to see this resolve displayed on T-shirts, bumper stickers, signs in neighborhood yards, lapel pins, and many other objects. This positive message at once identified Virginia Tech and its extended family as one large community and in no uncertain terms suggested that moving forward and becoming stronger is the only available option. Indeed, people worldwide were moved to join in this identity and to express solidarity, much as had been the case after the tragedies of September 11 in New York and Katrina in New Orleans.

Of course, the actual trajectory of recovery and the story of how the work of an institution can move ahead in the wake of a tragedy are not fully articulated in a single rallying cry or galvanizing speech. That challenge is left to members of the particular community, people who now share bonds that could never have been anticipated. A fair question to ask at this writing just four

months following April 16, 2007, is "What will the response look like, and how will the efforts to reestablish momentum in a severely traumatized academic community shape who we are in the future?"

My charge in this article is to focus particularly on the question of how an academic community can sustain itself and work productively and positively to achieve normally high aspirations for its students and all members of the community. As my short bio shows, I am writing from the perspective of a longtime member of the Virginia Tech community.

I begin with a short account of what happened in the immediate days following the shootings of Monday, April 16, 2007. This descriptive account, incomplete as it is, reveals general themes that may be important—and possibly even surprising—in thinking about how institutions can perform well in the difficult circumstances that accompany tragic events. For example, in addition to looking to the future for new strategies and answers, we may be well served by looking back at our history of engagement together. In our case at Virginia Tech, the

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1990s were marked by new investments in faculty support and cross-campus collaboration. Some of these investments, such as those in new centers and initiatives for teaching, technology use, learning communities, and diversity, had the effect of nudging people to cross academic boundaries and expand relationships that previously had not been as actively nurtured. Over the years, we could empirically see this migration, but I am not sure that we thought very much about the full range of possible implications. My tentative hypothesis now, following April 16, is that we have a whole new way of assessing these investments and can appreciate more fully our commitments to strengthening the social fabric of our institution. The strength of our social fabric came to the forefront as we faced this tragedy.

A COMMUNITY COMES TOGETHER

THE EXTRAORDINARY DAYS that immediately followed the mass shootings on April 16 were filled with shock and grieving. We began to come to grips with what had happened and, at the same time, knew that somehow the remaining three weeks of the academic year still needed to be negotiated. One very early decision was to close classes for the remainder of the week of April 16 and to reopen for academic business the following Monday, April 23. This necessary break allowed the faculty time to reflect on how they would handle themselves and their classes, and it also allowed those of us at the Center for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching (CEUT) a brief window in which to decide how we could be of assistance and to implement the actions we felt we could take.

My colleagues and I anticipated the tremendous uncertainty and difficulty that faculty members would face in meeting with their students just one week following the tragedy. This idea was confirmed through

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several helpful conversations with concerned colleagues at other institutions, who reminded us that faculty members would require personal support themselves even as they were preparing to take care of their students. We appreciated very much the helpful advice from Syracuse University, which had lost thirty-five students in the 1988 bombing and destruction of Pan Am Flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland. And we received continuing support and helpful information via the Professional and Organizational Development Network, a national organization of professionals who lead the many teaching support centers across the country. There were too many expressions and offers of support to do justice to them here; suffice it to say that we did not feel alone in negotiating the days following April 16.

Our response at CEUT centered on two main actions. First, we arranged and advertised three brown-bag conversations, which were held at noon on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday of the week that began with the shootings. We billed these meetings as informal opportunities for faculty to provide mutual support and to share ideas about how to handle the resumption of classes the following Monday. Second, we replaced our center's Web site with a temporary new site that included a variety of information sources on dealing with tragedy, both for individuals and for educators charged with supporting others. This site, which was activated on April 19, is now archived at http://www.ceut.vt.edu/april_16.html.

With just two hours' notice on Wednesday, April 18, approximately forty faculty members answered our invitation to meet at Hillcrest Hall, which is a familiar venue for many of the faculty development functions that CEUT offers. Some brought lunch. We provided beverages, snacks, and a deliberately minimal structure for the discussion because we did not want to assume that we knew what participants might need during this time.

We arranged the space to allow groups of five to eight participants to gather at round tables. At each table, brief written instructions invited participants to begin by allowing each other to share how they were doing, if they chose to do so. Most did, and tears were not unusual as people shared their emotions. Groups at each table then moved to sharing ideas about how to organize and conduct the first meetings with students the following week. The few members of our faculty at CEUT were available at the tables simply to remain alert to any expressed needs that would require an additional response from us.

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Our sense from that first day was that the discussions did help in several ways. First, everyone could clearly see that pain, anxiety, and uncertainty were broadly shared and that it was natural to have and to display those feelings. Second, participants could see that it was also natural to wonder what one's own emotional response would be at the first class meeting and to face a great deal of uncertainty and intensity from students. Talking through these concerns clearly seemed to calm those who participated, perhaps because the dialogue and social interaction helped participants place their own feelings and thinking into a larger framework. By the end of two hours, many were heard to say that they now had a better idea of how to proceed.

Thursday arrived with one key instructional issue still unresolved by the university: how to handle exams and grades. Given the disruption of classes, the emotional impact on everyone, and the certainty that many students would not be able to handle the typical pressures associated with end-of-semester papers, exams, and concern about grades, everyone knew that business as usual would simply not work. We knew that an announcement on this issue would soon be coming from the university provost, but the timing was uncertain. In the meantime, we prepared for a second noon brown-bag session and anticipated slightly higher participation. Shortly before noon, people began arriving, and they kept coming until the large room in Hillcrest was filled with more than ninety faculty members and administrators.

This much larger session began with a series of questions or comments that some of the participants were eager to contribute to the whole group, and it was clear that most of those present wanted to hear all the comments, and not confine their participation to the round tables as had happened at the earlier session. They seemed to need the connection with the entire room. Some concerns and comments dealt with aspects of mental health support services on campus, and fortunately, three members of a large response team from our university's health care provider were present at the session and able to share information. It was also clear that guidelines were needed to deal with examinations, grading, and work not completed because classes would not be in session for a full week or because a student might be too traumatized to work effectively after only one week. Good timing came to our rescue when, less than halfway through the session, our vice provost for academic affairs arrived and explained what had just been agreed to by all the academic deans.

Essentially, students were given unprecedented control over the way the semester would conclude for them. This student-centered approach would avoid putting any student in jeopardy because of the April 16 event or because of their exposure and reaction to it. The choices this principle made available included earning a grade based on work already completed as well as several other options for completing additional work. All choices were available with little risk of making matters worse by opting to take final exams and performing poorly.

At the Thursday meeting, once the decision on grades was announced and follow-up questions were answered, the discussion continued among the participants. By this time, we had set ground rules for a large-group discussion. One key topic of discussion was the importance of a student-centered approach to everything we did to complete the semester. Allowing so much freedom to students, particularly in regard to approaches to grading, was clearly troubling to some members of the faculty, but there was much overall support for the idea, and that support was sometimes expressed in strong emotional terms. It occurred to me then that the tragic circumstances had triggered the type of conversations about the educational process that we would have been very pleased to hear under more normal circumstances. At this point, one could ask, "Is it possible for some *new normal* to emerge that strong advocates of student-centered education might regard quite positively?"

Friday, another group of about thirty-five faculty members participated in the brown-bag discussion, and they also reported being helped by the opportunity to share ideas, feelings, and concerns with others. My colleagues and I concluded that hectic week still badly shaken but with a good feeling about our faculty and confidence that they could successfully negotiate the remainder of the academic year. We know that many departed these meetings with good ideas about how to proceed and the knowledge that they were not alone in their uncertainties.

As classes resumed, we continued to offer late-afternoon support sessions, but these were only sparsely attended, which we considered a good sign. Indeed, the

semester concluded quickly, with many students leaving as soon as they had satisfied their chosen grading obligations. Graduation occurred, and the transition to summer resulted in a visibly quieter atmosphere in Blacksburg as faculty returned to disrupted research projects, found time for brief vacations, and began to prepare for a new academic year.

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

ONE OF THE EXCITING FEATURES of academic life is the fresh beginning we get to experience at the start of each academic year. At large institutions, this also means bringing in several thousand new students and usually dozens of new faculty members. This ongoing renewal is energizing and filled with great expectations. And because the territory is well charted, there is a strong sense of knowing how things should go as the rhythms of yet another academic season play out.

The coming year at Virginia Tech will contain all of these excitement-producing elements, shadowed now with uncertainty. What follows, then, is my attempt to outline a rough blueprint that can be used to think about how a productive community for learning can be preserved and strengthened, even in the wake of tragedy. While there is no magic in the suggestions offered here, there is a solid foundation of theory and practice to draw on in producing a long-term strategy.

Trust people. If there were known and clear procedures that would guarantee success in the coming year there would be strong incentives to package the process, teach it to people, and put in place some method of accountability to ensure compliance. Of course, we do not have such clear procedural knowledge, and in any case, the problem with a steering strategy is that it would short-circuit the greatest resource any institution has: its people, who bring to any problem situation a great diversity of good ideas. At Virginia Tech, the people are the key component in any blueprint for recovery and renewal. Regardless of one's role on campus, the basic ingredient is a common commitment to using one's skills and resources to fulfill the missions of learning, discovery, and engagement. When such diverse resources can be creatively combined in a common endeavor and enhanced by a caring environment, extraordinary things can happen.

The people resource is not limited to those in professional positions, of course. When the media spotlight was most intense following April 16, what everyone noticed was the strength of our student body. In educational contexts, we tend to think of students primarily as receivers of services, support, and knowledge. Gradually, that picture has been changing to reflect more of a partnership between faculty, student affairs professionals, advisors, students, and others. That transition in thinking is not yet complete, but much groundwork has already been laid at Virginia Tech. Relationships are being redefined to support learning and lead to more authentic communities. This theme is playing out most concretely in the growing number of student learning communities that either are being deliberately developed or are emerging as a by-product of particular pedagogies and environments such as studios, service-learning projects, and capstone experiences.

Finally, one very practical consideration in supporting people who are doing their job under stressful or unfamiliar circumstances is to *help them remember to fly the plane.* I flew airplanes privately for a long time, and my certification required periodic checks by examiners, who would ride with me to ensure minimum levels of competence. These examinations always involved checking knowledge of and skill with emergency procedures. Even on simple planes, the procedures were sometimes distracting enough that I would forget to fly the plane. This was embarrassing enough with an instructor on board, but could have been deadly had I been alone. I tried to always whisper to myself, "Don't forget to fly the plane!"

This lesson is good to remember when we face any complex task that can be further complicated by emotional stress and the drain on processing capacity that accompanies crisis. Most of us educators have developed routines and strategies that are good or at least adequate for keeping the plane straight and level. We know what we're doing, but as we add additional considerations to

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the mix, such as safety concerns or additional attention to student needs, things may get a little messy. I am sure that one adjustment we will see in the coming year is additional vigilance to be sure that people are receiving the support they need. For the practitioner, one eye on the basics even as we address the unexpected will keep the plane in the air.

Develop a history of working together. My experience working with faculty members and administrators over the dozen years I have provided leadership at CEUT suggests that it is vitally important to develop a track record of positive engagement. Effective mutual engagement involves a personal and institutional learning process in which we acquire the ability to balance our individual identities and capacities for autonomous action with a respect for the identities and capacities of others who may look at problems quite differently. When an institution has a history of collaborative activity, the prospects for effective institutional citizenship in emergency conditions (that is, mutual problem solving) are greatly enhanced.

Effective citizenship is exactly what is needed when an institution like Virginia Tech faces the long road to recovery that began, in our case, on the day following April 16. I am using the term *citizenship* in a specific sense that refers less to civic responsibilities and more to the process of composing our own reality in the context of relationships with others. The assertion "We are all Hokies" thus comes to represent a constructed reality; we become who we are through a process of mutually constructing meaning, not as a consequence of being defined externally.

My notion of working together to construct shared meaning is borrowed from a rich literature that describes how people build strategies and tools for constructing meaning and for engaging in ethical behavior. No one source is adequate as a complete road map to this idea of working together, but one volume does provide a good entry into the literature and frames working together in terms of the very helpful metaphor of a partnership. This book, *Learning Partnerships: Theory and Models of Practice to Educate for Self-Authorship,* edited by Marcia Baxter Magolda and Patricia King, is grounded in the idea that people living in the world do not author their own sense of meaning and identity as a solo act. And people do not contribute effectively as social agents without a few essential capacities. Key among these are

the capacity for reflective judgment, an integrated identity grounded in one's own history, and the ability to form mature, respectful relationships with others.

While *Learning Partnerships* was produced primarily to explain how we might educate young people for self-authorship and the ability to be effective as a citizen in the world, it also explains the mature capacities that adults must employ to thrive in a complex and uncertain world. The concept of learning partnerships captures effectively the capacities for joint problem solving that creating and nurturing healthy communities of learning will require.

A secondary reason for pointing to *Learning Partnerships* in this discussion is that it contains a chapter focused on Virginia Tech, in which I reported on a range of ways that our faculty has already been deeply engaged in inquiries and instructional designs involving the concept of self-authorship. Essentially, what we have done over a period of about eight years is form a partnership with Baxter Magolda, designed to elevate the dialogue on campus about learning as a socially constructive process and aimed at moving our students toward greater epistemological maturity and sophistication. Through this process, those of us participating have become better equipped to explain to ourselves what learning for effective citizenship means, all the while completely unaware of how these capacities for joint meaning making and citizenship would be taxed.

Facilitate the process of meaning making. Our recovery and eventual achievement as an academic community that not only rebounds but also reaches higher goals will likely depend on how we, together, make meaning of what has happened and how we see the future. My reference to the concept of learning partnerships contains some of the central ingredients involved in constructing the reality and the meanings we want in our future. Those realities are not fixed, handed down, or set out as propositional certainties. They are created as we tell stories about our strivings, successes, and failures. The stories we tell individually collectively form the narrative of our institutional experience, and it is through such narratives that we make sense of our work and lives. Jerome Bruner's account of learning through narratives in his book *Acts of Meaning* is compelling and informative. Participating in such narratives, both by listening and by telling, may be the only

way to discern *what we experience* apart from the empirical record of *what we do.* In Bruner's words, "Our culturally adapted way of life depends upon shared meanings and shared concepts and depends as well upon shared modes of discourse for negotiating difference in meaning" (p. 13).

The message for those of us who are in positions to support recovery is to put people in positions to tell stories and become part of the narrative structure that will emerge as we go on with life. In July 2007, two of us in CEUT were fortunate to engage in a phone conversation with psychologists Lennis Echterling and Anne Stewart at James Madison University, who were sharing with us some new thinking about the concept of resilience. The basic idea they shared is that in the aftermath of tragedy, many people not only survive but actually become stronger and more resilient as a result of the types and quality of engagement they have with others following the event. The model they use for conceptualizing resilience has several necessary and interrelated components; a central piece involves the use of narratives to construct a coherent framework for life and work that replaces the fragmented reality that may have resulted from the disrupting event.

I firmly believe that the preparation we have put in place for institutional learning will be instrumental in helping us work through the current crisis together. Why? Because a good deal of practice here at Virginia Tech has already resulted in the kinds of mature relationships that can lead to coherent and ethical action on behalf of the entire community. Some of that practice has taken place in the hundreds of events organized and hosted by CEUT over a dozen or so years, most characterized by a pedagogy that is invitational and collaborative.

Draw on organizing ideas and ideals. The trajectory toward understanding how functioning communities of learning work involves a significant learning process with which we have some experience. Specifically, ten years ago, we began a university-level project to investigate how learning communities might take a larger role in the educative process at our institution, particularly for students in the early stages of their program, for whom anonymity and isolation at a large university might be most problematic. The story of this initiative is longer than can be told here; my reason for mentioning it is that in our work, we developed a special appreciation for the late Ernest Boyer's conceptualizations of community, which he expressed most convincingly in his book *The Basic School.* During his time as president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Boyer gave special attention to the ways that educational institutions purposefully arrange the conditions for learning. In *The Basic School,* Boyer laid out six organizing principles that educators and educational institutions could use as tools to continually invent and reinvent places where communities of learners would thrive. Our initial 1998 planning report for Virginia Tech's Learning Communities Initiative summarized these principles for faculty consideration, and I include them here because of the special meaning these ideas can have for us now.

1. *Purposefulness.* The campus community is an educationally purposeful place where all participants share common goals and work together to advance the overall growth and well-being of its members.

2. *Communication.* The community is an open and trustful place, where civility is affirmed, where freedom of expression is protected, and where the channels for communication are not restricted.

3. *Justice.* The community affirms, both socially and educationally, that all individuals are honored and that respect for diversity will be aggressively pursued.

4. *Discipline.* It is recognized that community cannot be sustained in a chaotic atmosphere. Individuals are expected to recognize and accept their obligations to the group and to

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the social contracts that guide behavior for the common good.

5. *Caring.* The community is a caring place where the well-being of each member is supported and where support for one another is encouraged.

6. *Celebration.* The community remembers the heritage of the organization through rituals and celebrations, and marks both traditions and changes with care.

As we elevate our aspirations for community building during the process of recovery, each of these principles takes on special significance, and each can provide a useful reference point for continually assessing how we are doing. These ideas also relate well to Virginia Tech's existing Principles of Community http://www.vt.edu/principles.php), which were affirmed by our board of visitors in 2005 and are actively supported throughout the university. The bottom line is that the basic ideals of community need to be articulated in ways that are concrete and accessible to all people who see themselves as members.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I BEGAN this article by describing the several open meetings that we arranged on consecutive days following April 16. For many of the people who attended, the opportunity to be with others and to share concerns, emotions, and plans was just what was needed at the time. On the surface, this intervention seems absurdly simple to have achieved the impact we believe it did. But was it as simple as it seemed?

Consider that for more than a dozen years, CEUT has organized for faculty, administrators, and graduate students as many as one hundred annual events, large and small. From the very beginning, the philosophy we followed was to conduct our work through an invitational process, and we attempted to model the respectful posture that we hoped faculty members would take with their own students. In addition to the educational value of the events, we also wanted participants' experience to be positive. As part of our operation, we always offer modest refreshments, and we put careful thought into physical space in order to facilitate comfort and communication.

Because we communicate so often with the university community through print and electronic media, and because the communications are carefully constructed and consistent in their form, people know what to expect from one of our events. Key among these expectations is the knowledge that we will strive to provide a safe environment for discussing each individual's work.

Finally, we are quite sure that physical space makes a significant difference, for several very different reasons. The space we often use is the Hillcrest Hall dining room, an elegant lofty space with large windows, wood floors, a fireplace at one end, and an interesting history. (It is the residence hall that served women when they were first admitted to Virginia Tech.) Given that this room is not of modern construction, it is warm in summer, drafty in winter, and can be noisy when the groundskeepers are using their mowers in close proximity. Nevertheless, it has emotional appeal because it is aesthetically pleasant and is a place where a sense of community can be nurtured. Many of our celebratory events are held in this room. Repeated exposure to this appealing physical space and the types of experiences people have there result in a conditioning effect that is positive rather than neutral or negative. It is a safe meeting place for members of the entire university community.

Thus, in April, when we arranged the meetings to discuss responses to a tragedy and people came ready to participate, it is useful to know that many of them were participating in a process and in a place with a long history. We believe that makes a difference. The same reasoning would apply to a family that never eats dinner together and then suddenly has to come together to engage in a difficult conversation. The outcome is not

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likely to be successful. Setting the stage for productive faculty collaboration is not a last-minute thing. If we are successful in realizing the assertion "We will prevail," it will be in part because we long ago set the stage for doing the work that now must be done.

NOTES

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