



UP IN ARMS

Conceal carry policy still sparks controversy among students, faculty and staff in 2023

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With the implementation of the 2017 Kansas Personal and Family Protection Act, college universities were forced to make difficult decisions regarding which facilities should be properly and legally re-designated as gun-free facilities. Unlike neighboring universities like the University of Kansas and Kansas State University, Wichita State chose to label no facilities on campus — including the YMCA-housed daycare and student housing — as gun-free.

As the sixth anniversary of the law that enabled concealed firearms to be carried in all public buildings — including university grounds — approaches, WSU students, faculty and staff are still up in arms regarding whether concealed-carrying policies on college campuses threaten the health and safety of students or acts of violence.

STUDENT VOICES ON THE ISSUE

In a survey conducted by Victoria Owens, a public opinion and political psychology student, 44.7% of individuals polled said that they would feel less safe if they knew someone in their class was carrying a handgun on their person.

Over half of those surveyed, 52.6%, said they were unaware or had not observed WSU making an effort to educate students on the campus carrying policies. However, the survey was not distributed at a university-wide scale, so the accumulated responses made up less than 1% of the total student body.

Sounya Nimmo, a senior political science major, has voiced this opinion since beginning her academic career and says that the policy doesn't provide equal education and lacks the resources necessary to ensure campus safety to the extent that other policies do.

"We are informed immensely about sexual assault on campus and are given required trainings that educate students on the topic," Nimmo said. "We are informed about how to get help

on campus for mental health or physical. We are informed about drug and alcohol usage on campus and how to stay sober. We are not informed about conceal carry, nor are we educated about the meaning behind it."

Nimmo said that current concealed carry rules are not strict enough and that the university-recommended training is not adequately promoted to ensure student safety.

"With the medium/high crime rate that inevitably follows universities, it is wrong to add yet another factor to the mix," Nimmo said. "If you allow conceal carry on campus, you need to inform students about this, educate students whether or not they choose to carry that others around them may be carrying, and give required trainings."

As of July 2017, any individual 21 or older (or 18-20 with a provisional license) can conceal carry on college campuses without a license or permit with the assumption that they do so responsibly. The use of a concealed handgun is not permitted if the user is under the influence of drugs or alcohol, violates pre-existing handgun laws, and/or if the weapon is criminally discharged.

Additionally, concealed carry is prohibited in buildings that are designated as gun-free, however, none are currently designated as such on campus. Nimmo feels that these lax limitations invite the opportunity for tragedy to occur.

"We worry about our students in high school that tragically die due to other students and their usage of guns. Students in college are average between the ages of 18 and 23, which is two or more years away from the age our brains fully develop (mid-to-late 20s), and less than a year or more away from actually graduating high school," Nimmo said. "So, we are letting students make a decision that affects everyone around them, when they might not even realize the severity of their actions."

STAFF, FACULTY AND POLICE OFFICIALS ON THE ISSUE

During his eight years of service on campus as the Chief of the WSU Police Department (WSUPD), Guy Schroeder has borne witness to a variety of changes at the university,

66
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Senior, political science major

including the implementation of the 2017 "Campus Carry" law, which allowed concealed firearms to be carried in any public spaces, including university grounds, unless they are designated as gun-free zones.

The department and Schroeder were taken by surprise when the enactment of the law, which was a permanent extension of a nearly identical 2013 longstanding law, brought forth a new series of problems, concerns, liberties and safety obligations.

"There was just panic," Schroeder said. "But for as much consternation as there was, [the transition] was pretty seamless."

From an educator's perspective, WSU Political Science Professor Alexandra Middlewood noted a similar hesitance amongst professors and students when she began teaching the same year the policy was applied.

"There was a very mixed response from faculty and students," Middlewood said. "But I would say that there was more apprehension than acceptance of it."

Middlewood's statement has been corroborated by the influx of firearm-related reports that occur when new, especially less-restrictive, firearm laws are enacted. A study published by the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health found that "states that changed their [firearm] laws... had an average increase of 10.26 gun assaults per 100,000 population annually (a 21.6 percent increase) and an additional 1.44 per 100,000 gun homicides (34.9 percent increase) per year."

Former WSU communications professor Deborah Ballard-Reisch referenced similar statistics when supplementing her decision to leave campus in protest of the law, stating in an interview with The Wichita Eagle that "as someone who has experienced gun violence" she doesn't "feel safe with guns in the classroom."

SURVEY ON SAFETY CONCERNS

If someone in class was carrying a handgun on their person, would you feel...?

44.7% MUCH LESS SAFE

17 responses

44.7% LESS SAFE

17 responses

10.5% NO DIFFERENT

4 responses

0% MORE SAFE

0 responses

0% MUCH MORE SAFE

0 responses

Survey conducted by Victoria Owens on concealed carry policy. 38 individuals were polled.

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ALEXANDRA MIDDLEWOOD
WSU Political Science Professor

FOLLOWING LAW IMPLEMENTATION

Within the first few weeks of the law's implementation in 2017, a handful of misuse or accidental violations were reported. One professor forgot their firearm in a campus restroom in Jabara Hall, according to a police report obtained by a WSU open records request by The Sunflower. Word spread when someone posted a video on Facebook of the exposed firearm and the incident soon garnered national attention and became a prominent example of concealed carry misuse in doctoral papers and anti-campus conceal carry articles.

In a separate incident in 2018, a student's firearm slipped from his holster twice during a lecture, frightening nearby classmates, according to a police report obtained by a WSU open records request by The Sunflower.

While fortunately harmless, these incidents occur when new firearm laws are issued or current laws are relaxed, especially when permitted to conceal carry, aren't up to date on the proper rules and safety policies.

"Anytime you see a change in the law... there's always going to be confusion," Middlewood said. "While there is this increase in [the] misuse of the concealed carry law after 2017, it's really hard to say that 'oh, this is intentional.' And 'people were intentionally doing this.' A lot of the time it's just the law changed and people don't know what all falls under the new policy."

Over time, fewer firearm misuse or incidents on campus have been reported. Most issues regarding individuals who conceal carry on campus are precautionary calls, such as accidental mishandling incidents, rather than reports of active crimes being committed.

In minimizing concealed firearm incidents on campus, Schroeder believes that the responsibility of utilizing safe concealed-carrying practices falls into the hands of those who choose to do so.

"The folks that are responsible for carrying concealed, you're never going to know about," Schroeder said. "But we have to be responsible in how we conduct ourselves."

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DISCUSSION AND SAFETY EDUCATION

While the university does not provide the training that would enable a student to safely conceal carry on campus, a variety of resources for certified instructors from the WSU website. Additionally, WSUPD has taken action on other fronts, such as education and open communication.

Schroeder is part of a campus-wide discussion panel that coordinates how to best provide security for students on and off campus and avenues for reporting crime, such as the misuse or brandishing of a concealed firearm.

As an effort to promote student safety and ensure that concealed firearms remain concealed, Schroeder says that the police department takes immediate action on reports of unconcealed firearms, whether the brandishing is intentional or accidental.

"We always follow up. If somebody were to call, let's say somebody sees somebody with a gun, if somebody was acting foolish we deal with them appropriately," Schroeder said. "If they're carrying appropriately and their jacket comes open while they happen to be in line at Chick-Fil-A or something, we'll contact those folks. We'll make sure that they're all following the policy."

While the debate continues over whether it is safe or ethical for individuals to conceal carry on college campuses, the ruling remains in effect as it passes its five-year anniversary in the state of Kansas.

Students with questions or concerns regarding the concealed carrying policy are encouraged to consult the WSU Police Department, where they will be greeted with the transparency that Guy Schroeder and his officers take pride in.

"We don't have anything to hide," Schroeder said. "We're going to stay ahead of it [crime] if we can stay ahead of it. If we can't then we'll respond to it appropriately and we'll explain our response in the process. So don't be afraid to holler."