

Editorial: A Great Place to Feel Unsafe

The University's stifled response to an unattended gun in a Wescoe Hall bathroom on Tuesday speaks volumes about its priorities

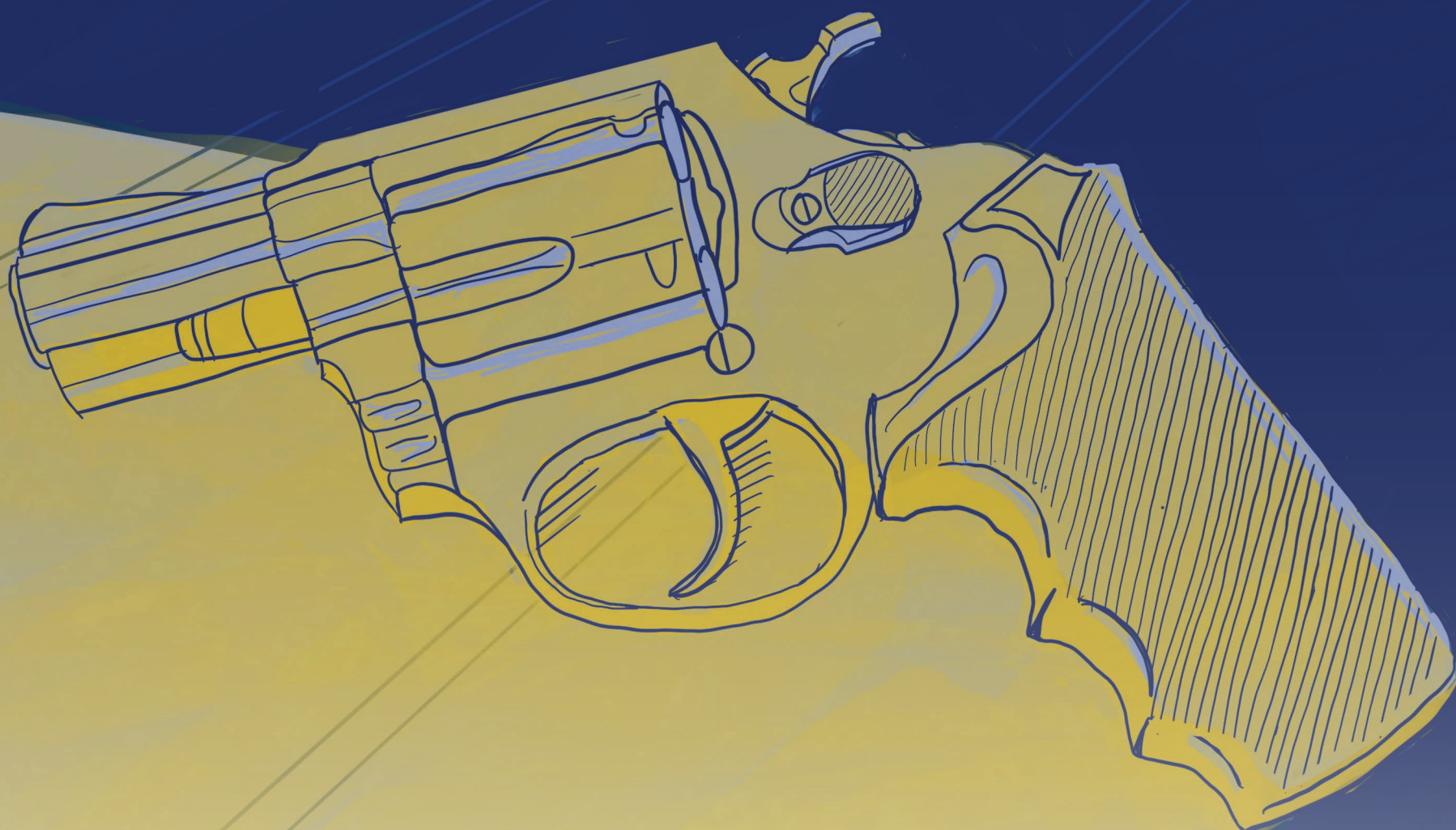


Illustration by Roxy Townsend

KANSAN EDITORIAL BOARD
@KansanNews

On Tuesday, as Deputy Police Chief James Anguiano conducted an information session on active shooter procedures to a mere five people, a stolen, loaded gun was left unattended in a men's restroom on the fourth floor of Wescoe Hall.

This is the first time the University has had to respond to a weapons-related incident since concealed carry went into effect on July 1 — and if procedures don't change following Tuesday's incident, it almost certainly won't be the last.

Campus police received a call about the gun just after 11 a.m., quietly removed it from the restroom and were gone from the scene — almost without a trace. Groups tabling outside Wescoe Hall at the time of the incident did not know police had come and gone when the Kansan asked just before noon.

Despite a loaded gun being left unattended in a restroom, no crime alert or other information was released to the Lawrence community. The Public Safety Office waited four hours to disclose the type of weapon or whether it was loaded, and did so only after repeated requests for updates.

Representatives with News and Media Relations and the Office of Public Affairs did not and still have not responded to the Kansan's multiple requests for comment.

This response, or lack thereof, sends the ominous and damning message that the entities tasked with protecting the safety of over 32,000 members of the University community are actually more concerned with protecting the University's public image.

Nothing productive can result from attempting to hide an instance of a gun being found unattended on a college campus. There is no reasonable explanation for the University not being completely transparent with the community about this particular incident — and about concealed carry in general.

This incident ultimately begs the question: Is the University of Kansas more concerned with catering to a conservative state legislature and governor out of fear of losing more education funding rather than ensuring its campus is safe?

Rep. Barbara Ballard, who represents the University in the state House of Representatives, told the Kansan that, while she didn't know all of the specifics from Tuesday's incident, it continues to highlight the importance of practicing safety in spite of a law she doesn't support.

"You don't know what somebody else will do with a gun that's registered to you. Let's say a child, for some reason, had picked it up to see what it was about. Since it was loaded, it could have gone off," she said. "We really have to practice gun safety and not leave them laying around for someone else or someone much younger who could harm themselves or someone else in the process."

The University has known since 2013 that its exemption to the Kansas Personal and Family Protection Act would expire on July 1, 2017, and concealed weapons would be allowed on campus. Four years later, the security provisions and education it has made available to students, faculty and staff are lacking.

"A gun is your personal property. We are responsible for our personal property. With this being two months since the law became effective, people are very nervous, people are angry, and I'm sure some people are pleased," Ballard said. "Regardless of how we feel about it, we have to be responsible. Whoever left it in the bathroom loaded was not a responsible individual. To leave it out in the open, someone could've been harmed."

Previously University officials — namely former chancellor Bernadette Gray-Little — were prohibited from publicly speaking out against guns being allowed on campus. State law explicitly forbids University officials from lobbying against the law's implementation, Ballard said.

The University's response to the law leading up to and since its implementation, however, has been suspect at best. Students and staff have continually indicated they don't feel safe and don't know what new policies are regarding both the concealed carry law and the University's safety procedures during active shooter situations.

If Tuesday is any indication, it is concerning to think how the University would handle a hypothetical situation with a more serious firearm offense — to the point where it's not clear whether the campus community would even know something happened.

This spring, the University announced the results of a commissioned campus climate survey that indicated an overwhelming opposition by students, faculty and staff toward the new concealed carry law. It's clear that University administration opposed the implementation of concealed carry but were prohibited by law to say so publicly.

This incident could have been a chance for the University to right those wrongs and get ahead of a matter of public safety. Instead, its offices chose yet again to keep a major situation out of the public eye.

Instead of openly addressing these issues and working to benefit the campus community it serves, the University has chosen to conduct matters of public safety in private and under a veil of secrecy, which is a deeply concerning trend for the future. The only way to prevent a tragedy is for the members of the University community who object to concealed carry to continue to voice their protests, concerns and outrage.

In order to hold the University accountable for the safety of its community, students, faculty and staff must demand more transparency from the offices designated to protect them.

Members of the editorial board are Conner Mitchell, Omar Sanchez, Ryan Liston and Mitch Tamblin