

Thinking about the Unthinkable: A Personal Reflection on the June 1 Incident at UCLA and Library Responses and Roles in Active Shooter Situations

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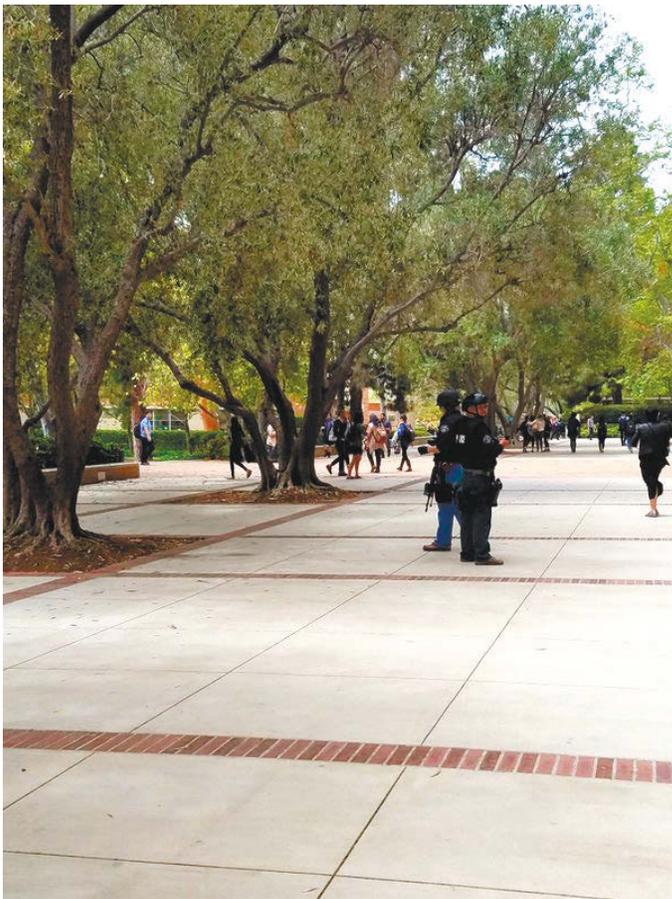
The first text from the UCLA campus alert system, “Bruin Alert,” on June 1, 2016, was sent at 9:49 a.m. and said, “Police activity. Avoid area around Engineering IV.” Four minutes later a second text was sent with the message, “shots fired, lock down.” This was the beginning of what would turn out to be a day of surprise, shock, and tremendous uncertainty mixed with moments of fear and sadness for the entire UCLA campus. In the end, what had at first been thought to be an active shooter situation turned out to be an incident of workplace violence that resulted in the murder of a faculty member and the suicide of one of his former students. This instance of workplace violence had a profound impact on the UCLA Library while it was happening and in the weeks and months since then. This article describes some of what went on in UCLA Library facilities during the lockdown, and it offers some practical suggestions for preparations and responses to similar situations.

The Lockdown

June 1 was a typical busy day at UCLA during the week before finals. The campus and the eight library buildings were bustling with students studying, writing papers, and meeting with their peers to work on assignments. Library staff members were attending to their normal responsibilities, although many librarians were either in meetings or out of their offices for a variety of reasons. No one in the library had any reason to expect anything out of the ordinary that day.

When the first two campus alerts came through, the general reaction of everyone, including library staff members, was to be stunned and uncertain about what to do. The texts instructed us to lock the doors to all campus structures, but doing this turned out to be more difficult

for the two largest libraries—the Charles E. Young Research Library (YRL) and the Powell Library—than anyone would have anticipated. Many students and faculty were already outdoors on their way to classes or to get coffee or breakfast, and those who were in buildings near the Engineering complex were instructed by police to leave their buildings and seek refuge in other parts of the campus. The public service ethos and caring attitudes of library staff made it almost impossible to lock the front doors while large groups of students could be seen wandering across the main campus quadrangle or around the north part of campus. Many of us felt a sense of responsibility to help get those students inside into a safer environment.



Police on UCLA campus, June 1, 2016.

Photo credit: Daphne Ying ([@whydaphnewhy](https://twitter.com/whydaphnewhy) on Twitter).

So, despite the texted instructions, we kept staff near the front doors of YRL and Powell to let students in. In Powell Library and the Young

Research Library we kept the front doors locked but had staff standing just inside to open the doors if students came to seek shelter. And come they did, for at least an hour after the first two alerts. Some knew that they needed to find a place to be safe, while others wandered somewhat aimlessly and didn't really know why the campus buildings that were normally open to them were now closed and locked. The students who came into YRL or Powell were directed to areas away from the front doors, but the general sense of anxiety and disbelief made many of them reluctant to leave the lobby areas. It appeared that other students had had training in active shooter situations; they found areas away from the doors and crouched under tables with the lights off and interior doors closed and locked (if possible).

Many students commented as they came into the buildings that they considered the libraries to be safe places where they could take refuge. The Young Research Library ended up with an estimated 800 students inside, and Powell Library had approximately 2,000 students throughout the building in every possible space, including classrooms, offices, group study rooms, and the large reading room. The other libraries—Science and Engineering, Geology, Arts, Management, Music, and the Louise M. Darling Biomedical Library—ended up with dozens of students each. In every case, the front doors were eventually locked, and the staff who were on hand (sometimes these were student employees) figured out places to hide out of sight. And while some of the staff had been through active shooter and emergency preparedness training, some had not. Fortunately our enterprising student employees had the presence of mind to check Google to find out what to do and followed the advice they found there to shepherd the students in their facilities to safer locations.

One of the greatest uncertainties of the day was not knowing whether it was the right thing to ask staff to stand at the door to let students in. We didn't know whether there really was an active shooter situation. No shots were heard, so it seemed safe, but it was a real risk. And many of the students who came into the library were carrying or wearing backpacks, which could have concealed weapons. Was that really a violin case, or did

it have some sort of gun in it? Again we didn't know, but our feeling of responsibility to the students and campus took precedence and drove us to stay by the doors to let stranded students in.

Waiting...and Not Knowing What News to Believe

After the second of the two initial Bruin Alert messages, communication from the campus went silent. There was no further official information after 9:53 a.m. until a message at 11:24 a.m. indicating that the “lockdown continues.” The same message was repeated 20 minutes later and also advised others to “not come to campus.” In Powell Library we tried to call the campus police to find out what they wanted us to do in terms of adhering to the lockdown, but when we finally got through after roughly half an hour on hold, their advice was to “use your best judgment.”

In the meantime, we were all using our cell phones and other devices to try to learn more about what was happening, although getting a strong cell phone or Wi-Fi signal became increasingly difficult as time passed. Some of us tuned into local news television feeds, while others relied on social media to get information. Family and friends texted messages, a number of which contained updates from news coverage they were seeing. Rumors were rampant: “There are groups of men dressed in black with guns roaming the campus;” “It’s a single shooter dressed in black;” “Multiple people have been killed;” and “Shots have been fired in other buildings on campus.” The Los Angeles Police Department received a report of “shots fired at Young Research Library” at 10:47 a.m., and at 11:19 a.m. there was a “second hand report of shots heard at Young Research Library, 5th floor.”

Finally, after what seemed an interminable wait, at 12:12 p.m. a Bruin Alert was sent giving the “all clear” message. Unfortunately the Bruin Alert system was not robust enough to handle the messaging load, so in some cases it took more than 10 minutes for a text to arrive. This was especially distressing when people were standing in groups and some received the message long minutes before the others.

During the time we waited for information, student reactions ranged from relative calm to agitation and anxiety. Quite a few were worried about missing classes and/or exams, and they wondered where their friends were and whether they were safe. They also wanted their families to know they were okay. One of the roles we library staff members played, in addition to offering places to shelter, was to keep calm and be as reassuring as possible. We were the parental presence, so we talked with them, sometimes in a light-hearted way and other times trying to be as comforting as possible. Since it was the week before finals, we were lucky to have snacks and water on hand, and we gave those out to students in an attempt to help them relax.

What about Those Purported “Shots Fired at Young Research Library”?

In situations of this nature, the police have to check every rumor, and they have to be prepared for the worst. We realized this after the fact. But while the event was going on, to be sure nothing terrible had happened in YRL, the police sent a SWAT team that swarmed into the lobby, ordering the few library staff and students who were there to lie spread-eagled on the floor. It made no difference to them that some of the staff were from library administration, and they did not accept the assurances of the library’s community service officer (employed by the UCLA police) that nothing had happened on the fifth floor or anywhere else in the building. The police were in charge and had their assault weapons at the ready. For members of the campus community who are accustomed to thinking of the police as community members who share the same values, it was extremely jarring to be subjected to this kind of treatment and suspicion.

Once the police determined that nothing bad had happened in YRL and there was no threat, they began to make plans to march the YRL occupants (staff, students, and anyone else in the building) off campus. This, too, was a disturbing development: many people had driven to campus and had their cars in one of the parking garages, yet they were told that they’d have to leave the cars and find alternative ways to get

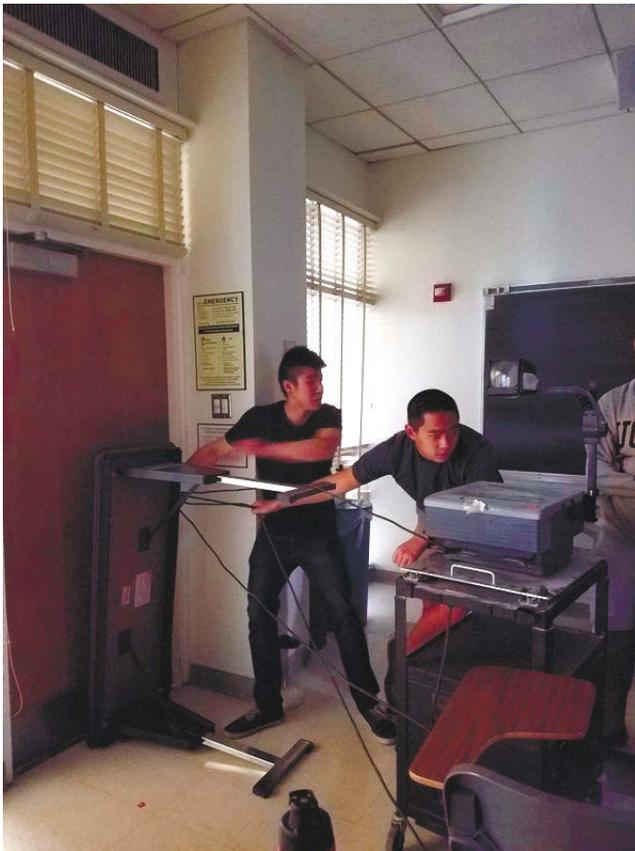
home. Others simply wondered about their safety if a shooter happened to be waiting off campus or near the perimeter of campus. But just as the police were about to begin the evacuation process, the all-clear message came through.

The Aftermath

Once the crisis was over, most students left the library buildings quickly. Some commented that they wanted to go home to be with family and friends so they could regain a sense of normalcy. Others were deeply worried that they had missed exams and end-of-quarter class sessions that would make it hard for them to finish their academic year. But by and large, there was a palpable feeling of tremendous relief and emotional exhaustion.

Library staff experienced similar highs and lows. For many it was a relief to get back to work, and it gave them the impetus to put the trauma of the day behind them. We were all aware that finals were looming, and that helped us move past the severe strains of the day to get back to business-as-usual as quickly as possible. Even so, some staff suffered from the aftereffects of a traumatic experience and found relief by leaving the campus. The campus administration offered counseling and psychological services and encouraged staff and students to take advantage of these services. Still, the feelings of anger, betrayal, and insecurity lingered.

We received a number of comments from students and faculty about our physical facilities and whether they were equipped appropriately for an active shooter event. One teaching assistant wrote, “I wonder about library planning for some ‘old-fashioned’ type room per floor that can house a lot of students with no windows and equipment that can be used to barricade doors, or some type of stored ‘barricade’ equipment that could be implemented in these situations...”



UCLA students barricading classroom door, June 1, 2016.
Photo credit: Daphne Ying ([@whydaphnewhy on Twitter](#)).

The entire UCLA community was invited to participate in a post-event survey and to contribute any thoughts or suggestions that were included in the campus report about June 1. One of the contributions that resonated with many of us is the following:

I am lucky enough to have a very safe office with a locked door and no windows (3rd floor of YRL). Several colleagues were in the office with me, and we were monitoring the news feeds online. We knew that we were to stay in place; one of our admin assistants called to let us know what was going on. There were rumors about a shooter in our building. At one point, a colleague went to the restroom—she found three students hiding there—shoving backpacks against the bathroom door, scared out of their wits. We took them into my office and waited until we received an “all clear” message from staff on the first floor.

Believe me, this was the first time I was thankful for having a nondescript office with no windows! I was glad that we could offer some shelter and comfort to those kids.

Lessons Learned

Now, several months after the incident and after a campus task force reviewed the events of the day to make recommendations for the future,¹ there are some key points worth sharing with other libraries:

1. Jerry Garcia once said that “the situation is the boss.” In an active shooter situation, that is especially true. What happens will evolve quickly and will be determined by the actions of the shooter(s) and police. As much as those of us in senior library administrative positions might like to think we’re in charge, we are not in situations like these. The police will take over, and they will not stop to ask questions until they know they have time to do that.
2. Whichever staff and/or student employees happen to be on duty will be put to the test, and they will end up handling the situation to the best of their abilities. They will be called on to respond, and we will have to rely on their good judgement in the chaos of the moment as well as the tedium of an extended event.
3. Students will come to the library to seek refuge. They seem to have an innate understanding that we care about them, and it was clear at UCLA that they trust us to help them. Library staff will end up being the people the students seek to provide comfort, advice, and support. We need to educate our campus administrations and emergency responders about this so they will know they may find large numbers of people in the libraries and also that adhering to a lockdown order will be difficult unless there is an imminent threat.
4. Communication will be problematic. Whether it is false reports coming through social media or incomplete information from the campus, it is highly likely that there will be significant breakdowns

in communication. This will make it even more challenging for the library staff involved.

5. Library buildings are not designed and built for active shooter situations. Most of our interior doors in public areas do not lock; this has been a best practice for years to ensure safety and security in our buildings. Unless a campus takes extra precautions to prepare for the possibility of active shooter situations, it is likely that we will only be able to lock our exterior doors and a few of our interior spaces, but we will not be able to lock all spaces and/or cover the windows.
6. On the positive side, library staff do a better job preparing for emergencies than many others on campus, so we all have the opportunity to think through how a violent incident might happen and what we can do to be ready.
7. Little things make a difference: Since people in library buildings during a lockdown are under tremendous stress, taking small steps to provide them with food or resources may help them feel more secure. If snacks or water are available, offer it to them. Having a supply of power cords for different types of devices to loan out will also come in handy, especially if the lockdown goes on for several hours. Any gesture of caring will help calm nerves that are on edge.

The UCLA Library and the campus are taking steps to address issues raised during and after the June 1 incident. The campus has identified a solution for door locks that both meet fire marshal requirements as well as normal safety precautions to prevent individuals from being locked in campus rooms while also providing the capability of being locked from the inside in an active shooter situation. Improvements are being made in campus communication protocols, and the Bruin Alert system has been moved to a more robust platform that will allow speedier and more consistent delivery of emergency messages. In the library we are renewing discussions about emergency preparedness, and we expect to continue to arrange for annual active shooter training sessions that the UCLA police department provides.

Contemplating an active shooter incident is hard. Most of the training offered by our campuses focuses on individual safety (“run, hide, fight”), but those of us who work in libraries may face the need to help keep our students and other users safe. We think of ourselves as providing a community resource in the best of times, but we may be called upon to do that in the worst of times, too. It’s a daunting responsibility and one I hope most of us won’t have to bear!

Endnote

- 1 UCLA Campus Safety Task Force, *Report and Recommendations*, October 2016, <https://ucla.app.box.com/v/task-force-report>.

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