Duck and Cover, Little Lady: Women and Campus Carry

By Patricia Somers, Jessica Fry, and Carlton J. Fong

“It’s July and what are my UT colleagues and I discussing? Not research. Not vacations, rather, the difference between a loaded weapon and a chambered round. (Not much.) The difference between prohibiting and discouraging concealed weapons in the classroom. (Both disallowed.) And whatever happened to free speech and campus government?”

—UT Austin professor, August 2016

In the ultimate irony, the Texas law that allows state university students to legally carry concealed weapons to their classes took effect on August 1, 2016. This was 50 years to the day since Charles Whitman stationed himself on the University of Texas at Austin clock tower with a rifle, killing 13 people and injuring another 30 in the first of the modern era’s mass shootings. Texas was the eighth state to make “campus carry” legal, followed by Arkansas and Georgia in 2017. Meanwhile, more than a dozen other state legislatures recently have considered similar bills. Campus carry, which advocates assert is the way to stop mass shootings, is one of the most contested issues in higher education today.

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What is campus carry? How did it come about? What has been the impact on faculty and staff, particularly women? This article addresses these questions through the experiences of women faculty and staff members at UT Austin, ground zero in the battle over guns on campus.

**GUNS ON CAMPUS: WHO HAS THEM, WHO HATES THEM**

In the last decade, since the U.S. Supreme Court waded into gun rights in 2008, firearms laws in the U.S. have changed dramatically. In 2008, in the case of the *District of Columbia vs. Heller*, which involved a district law banning most handguns, the U. S. Supreme Court declared that the Second Amendment protects citizens’ rights to self-defense and that the federal government cannot prohibit guns in homes.\(^1\) Two years later, the Court further made clear that the Second Amendment right to “keep and bear arms” could not be infringed by state and local gun laws, either—a move that opened the door to campus carry and other measures.\(^2\) In the last five years alone, 70 new state laws have loosened gun restrictions, the *New York Times* found.\(^3\)

All 50 states have laws that address whether guns can be carried on college campuses. Sixteen, including California, Florida, and Massachusetts, ban firearms altogether.\(^4\) Others, such as Alabama, Ohio, and Virginia, leave the decision to each campus or university system. An increasing number—up to ten in 2017—allow concealed weapons onto public university property: Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Kansas, Mississippi, Idaho, Oregon, Texas, Utah, and Wisconsin. (Tennessee also allows some faculty to carry concealed weapons, but not students.) Among the ten, various state-imposed conditions exist: for example, Wisconsin campuses can prohibit guns if signs are posted at every campus entrance, stating weapons are prohibited. Other conditions focus on the type of firearm, where and how it can be carried or displayed, and the

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required training or permits. In Texas, a concealed carry license holder must have six hours of training and a permit from the state, and must conceal the gun on their body or in a personal belonging such as a backpack, briefcase, or purse.

Several national groups have lobbied for or against state laws on campus carry. Most well known is the National Rifle Association. Originally founded in 1871 to advance rifle marksmanship, the reputedly 5-million member group began lobbying for gun rights in 1975 and is known to have one of the most powerful lobbying operations on Capitol Hill. Smaller, but more dedicated to the specific issue of campus carry, is Students for Campus Carry, founded by a University of North Texas student in the wake of the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings. In 2012, the group won a court case, Regents vs. Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, that led to Colorado’s campus-carry law, and currently is suing Ohio State University over its ban on concealed weapons. Today the organization reports its membership at 36,000-plus and boasts of 350 campus chapters.5

On the other side, the list of groups opposed to guns on campuses is long, and includes faculty and staff associations, parents, law enforcement agencies, and others. The National Education Association’s Representative Assembly first approved its resolution on gun-free schools in 1982 and revised it in 2016.6 A year earlier, in 2015, the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) brought together three education organizations, including the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), in a joint statement that condemned campus-carry laws.7 That same year the Modern Language Association (MLA) authored its own anti-campus carry resolution signed by 28 academic and scholarly organizations, and, at the 2015 MLA conference in Austin, marched in protest on the Texas State Capitol.8

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At the state and institutional level, various groups have lobbied against campus carry laws and regulations. In Texas, for example, the Texas Faculty Association (TFA), Texas AFT, the Texas Association of

### NEA RESOLUTION ON DEADLY WEAPONS

In 2016, the National Education Association reaffirmed the organization’s commitment to safe work places. Here is the text of the resolution:

**I-31. Gun-Free Schools and the Regulation of Deadly Weapons**

The National Education Association believes that all students and education employees must be allowed to learn and work in an environment free of unauthorized guns and other deadly weapons. Severe penalties should be enacted and strenuously enforced for criminal actions involving guns and other deadly weapons, especially in school settings, and for those who profit from the illegal sale, importation, and distribution of these weapons. The Association also believes that individuals who bring guns or deadly weapons to school should be excluded from school and school grounds until completion of a mandatory prescribed intervention.

The Association further believes that our communities, schools, and students are safer when common sense gun regulations are in place. The Association supports banning assault weapons, limiting the capacity of ammunition magazines, requiring background checks and a waiting period for all gun purchases, creating a national database of gun sales, and preventing people with mental illness and/or a documented history of domestic violence from purchasing firearms. The Association believes that minors shall not be allowed to buy, own, or sell firearms.

The Association also believes that scientific and medical research on the causes and prevention of firearm violence should be extensive and ongoing and that gun owners should participate in educational programs that stress responsible ownership, including safe use and storage of guns. (1982, 2016).
College Teachers, Texas Council of Faculty Senates, Texas Conference of AAUP, and various state employee unions have all lobbied against campus carry legislation since 2011. (In 2013, then-TFA Executive Director Mary Dean passed out small yellow rubber duckies to members of a state House security committee, saying faculty would be “sitting ducks” for any student with a gun and a complaint.)

On the UT Austin campus, Gun Free UT (GFUT), a grassroots group of faculty, staff, students, and alumni that says it is “armed with reason,” opposed campus carry through numerous protests, posters, petitions (individual and departmental), and through testimony at state and campus hearings. GFUT also supported a 2016 federal lawsuit by three UT Austin faculty members seeking to overturn the law. The most eye-catching anti-carry movement likely was “Cocks Not Guns.” Organized by a recent UT Austin graduate who sought to “fight absurdity with absurdity,” the group developed a series of protests and actions against Texas laws that allow the open carrying of firearms but outlaw the public display of dildos.

CONVERSATIONS WITH WOMEN ABOUT CAMPUS CARRY

Over the years, several quantitative studies have surveyed faculty, staff, or students about guns on campus, with some focusing on women. However, little research has addressed the implementation of a campus carry law, used qualitative methods, or focused on women faculty and staff. To frame our 2016 study of women faculty and staff members at UT Austin, we used self-determination theory (SDT). SDT suggests that the factors of autonomy, relatedness, and belonging influence motivation, productivity, and general well-being.

We interviewed about 100 women faculty and staff members last year,
all working on the UT Austin main campus, before and during the early implementation of campus carry. In this article, we focus on how the women rated campus safety, how campus carry has affected their relationships and interactions with colleagues, students, and administrators, and how firearms on campus have exacerbated power differentials.

While faculty and staff members recognize college campuses as a marketplace of ideas, security experts have a very different view. The latter point to large and sometimes multiple campuses with porous borders, large numbers of visitors, and limited barriers to violence. Other factors in campus safety have been identified by student services staff members, including isolation, drugs and alcohol on campus, stiff academic competition, and the still-developing prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that is “responsible for judgement, impulse control, and a governor on intense emotions.”

In a recent survey, 66 percent of student services staff members pointed to students’ “mental health” as their top concern. Nonetheless, our campuses are generally safe places, according to federal data. Between 2001 and 2013, the overall number of crimes reported on U.S. campuses decreased 34 percent to about 18.4 incidents per 100,000 students.

In our interviews, the UT Austin women said they felt generally safe on campus. But many expressed concern over the 2016 murder of a female student, and many noted they felt less safe in campus parking garages.
When asked about campus safety, some women bracketed their remarks with recollections of violent incidents on campus. A few recalled the tower shooting in 1966. One observed that she arrived on campus as a student shortly after the tower shooting, but never felt unsafe until the summer of 2016 when she regularly encountered a “rough homeless population” outside her off-campus office building.

The participants also discussed two more recent experiences with campus violence. In 2010, a student rode a city bus to campus, where he used an AK-47 to shoot at pedestrians on a campus thoroughfare. Eventually, he entered the main library and shot himself. Several buildings in the core of campus (including the building in which we are housed) were placed on lockdown during this incident. A faint black “X,” still visible on doors in our building, lingers as evidence of the SWAT team’s work that day. The second incident, which took place in April 2016, shortly before our interviews began, was the on-campus rape and murder of an 18-year-old woman student by a 17-year-old homeless man. Both incidents weighed heavily in the discussions about general campus safety. A single incident in the fall of 2016, in which a student shot a security guard at an off-campus fraternity party, was the only report of gun use. All of these incidents increased the level of fear on campus.

POWER DIFFERENTIALS EXPOSED

For some women, campus carry exacerbated the extant inequities and power differentials on campus, and in higher education generally. Across the academy, women are more likely to be contingent faculty members—with little job security or voice in their working conditions. Women make up only slightly more than a quarter of all full professors, and less than 15 percent of the presidents at doctoral-degree granting institutions. They also earn less: At doctoral public institutions across the U.S., women faculty
were paid an average $76,562 in 2015–16, compared to $94,647 for men.¹⁸ Our conversations with women faculty showed how campus carry laws could exacerbate these power differentials around gender, and exposed other issues related to race, sexual orientation, and disabilities, as well as power differentials experienced by non-faculty, academic staff or support professionals.

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One woman commented that, since guns were permitted in her building, both she and her department had been labelled as marginal and undeserving of protection.

Inequities around campus resources also were uncovered. For example, some larger, resource-rich departments brought in private consultants to advise on campus safety and to assess risks in their offices and classrooms. Less wealthy departments had fewer resources to train and educate their employees about the law and gun safety.

Power Differentials Among Programs and Departments

The Texas concealed carry law allows for a limited number of buildings, such as those with laboratories, child care centers, university high schools, and mental health centers, to be designated gun-free zones. Some employees working in buildings that were not designated gun-free zones felt less valued, less essential, inferior, and demoralized.

Power Differentials Around Race, Sexual Orientation, and Disabilities

A number of women expressed concerns about differentials in enforcement and implementation. One Black woman asked, “If, for any reason, I did carry a gun and whipped that sucker out [would I] be seen differently? Am I going to be seen as the angry woman of color?” Two women with disabilities indicated they received no support for gun issues that might arise in their work places, even though they had well-defined Americans with Disabilities Act accommodation plans for other work.
issues. A queer faculty member said, “I know the target is on my back. . . if you think about hate crimes, you think about being in a place like Texas.”

Likewise, faculty and staff members with less protection or personal power expressed that they were very reluctant to oppose campus carry or even raise minor complaints about its implementation. Several women registered concern about working in open reception areas or “cubicle farms,” which had no security. One woman pointed out that a determined shooter could walk in from the street and kill several people with little effort.

**Power Differentials Outside the Academy**

Several participants suggested that the campus carry law was an attempt by lawmakers and administrators to assert power over faculty and staff members. Observed one, “The [Texas legislature did not enact concealed carry] for the state capitol, they didn’t pass it for the governor’s house…I think this is super hypocritical.” Another faculty member asserted, “[Campus carry] speaks for the real sense of enmity between Texas politicians and intellectuals of any sort...this is a way they demonstrate their power over us.”

**Our Protectors? Power Differentials Inside the Academy**

Several of the women said some male colleagues had indicated they were armed and could come to the defense of the women in the department. A former safety officer told one faculty member that if a shooter came to her classroom, she should “duck and cover,” then wait for a police officer to arrive. She asked how to protect her 75 students, who would be much more exposed. He had no advice other than to “hit the deck.”

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CAMPUS CARRY’S EFFECTS ON TEACHING AND LEARNING

The women we interviewed discussed at length how campus carry affected relationships with colleagues and students. Many faculty members said they now feared candid discussions with students about their academic performance, indicating that the specter of an angry student with a gun changes the dynamic of an already difficult discussion. One participant said she had some “worrysome experiences with troubled students.” She vowed to be more cautious in dealing with students. Another said, “I have students. . . who are having challenges in the field, and I have had angry students. . . who part of the reason they were in my office was because of . . . threatening people with guns.” Several women mentioned that they would seek “backup” in the form of a faculty or staff colleague who would either sit in on meetings with potentially armed students or wait outside the open office door. Because the law currently exempts establishments that serve alcohol, many faculty and graduate assistants (men and women) routinely hold office hours in these “safe spaces.” One faculty member said, “I don’t have office hours in my office anymore. I don’t feel safe. I go into a public place where no firearms are allowed.” Other safe spaces are churches and private office buildings where posted signs ban guns from the premises. Some faculty members, only partly in jest, have suggested holding class sessions in the campus pub.

Likewise, classroom dynamics—possibly even the caliber of teaching and learning—have been affected by campus carry. One faculty member noted that she was trying to move most of her classes online. Another said she planned to keep discussion benign and “just keep it safe.” She noted that her approach was not unusual for woman academics—and also for junior academics—and acknowledged it would inevitably affect the quality of education. Yet another participant was more rebellious in relation to
classroom discussions: “I’m going to keep doing what I think I need to do,” she said, adding that she would “still fail students if they need to be failed.” In addition, several faculty members said their students told them that they planned to be less critical and more passive in class discussion for fear of a fellow student disagreeing and responding with a gun rather than words.

The staff members we interviewed, most of whom have extensive student contact, also cited concerns about their daily interactions. One woman commented, “If they [the students] were to be in possession of a firearm... that is a concern because of the type of advising we do. It’s not a good feeling for me.” In general, staff members recognized they were less safe, particularly if they were in a building that had not been exempted from campus carry. Moreover, staff members have more limited free speech rights and thus are hesitant to criticize the law or its implementation.

Campus carry also has altered the climate in academic departments. One woman gave an overarching description, “In this [department], there is a system to defend carrying guns... I didn’t want to push much... some staff and faculty... are carrying guns.” Another woman said her department chair, also a woman, was a strong supporter of campus carry. She was afraid their differences in opinion about campus carry would damage their relationship. In general, whether faculty members were tenured, tenure-track, or contingent, they believed campus carry had shifted the climate in academic departments—and not for the better.

A CHILLING CLIMATE

The women we interviewed clearly expressed how campus carry had affected their academic and personal lives. In terms of self-determination theory, they talked of the three main constructs. First, since campus carry,
they felt less competent. Many talked of modifying instructional strategies, abandoning their offices to work in gun-free spaces or at home, safeguarding their interactions with academic colleagues, and altering their work with students. Related to competence is autonomy, the second factor in SDT. Both the state law and the confusing implementation of campus carry reduced faculty’s autonomy, or ability to self-govern, even in her classroom or office space. Because of high fines for non-compliance and confusion about the rules, faculty and staff disengaged from their jobs and the university. Finally, guns on campus created a frigid climate for women inside and outside the classroom. This reduced relatedness and relationships of trust. These three issues—lack of competency, autonomy, and trust—combined to have a strong negative impact on campus as faculty and staff members grew alienated, withdrawn, and disengaged. Damages to productivity and emotional well-being are a likely result. Faculty and staff turnover—either “clocking out on the job” or leaving the university—are not uncommon. Indeed, at least two Kansas public university professors have made public resignations recently because of the state’s campus carry law that went into effect in 2017. “I cannot work in a climate in which students are fearful to claim their voices because the person next to them in my classroom may have both different views and a gun,” wrote Deborah Ballard-Reisch, a Wichita State University professor, in a July blog post announcing her resignation. “I cannot work in an environment where I am fearful to challenge my students to reach their full potential because they may have guns. I find this law to be the antithesis of everything a civil society stands for.”

These results should be a clarion call for other campuses or states considering campus carry. In the short term, we may not reverse the political landscape. However, we can emphasize process, process, and process in the discussion and implementation of campus carry. In particular, the issues of changed relationships and power differentials that we identified in our research need to be addressed. Faculty and staff unions have an important role to play in ensuring the process is inclusive, fair, and accepted by the community.
ENDNOTES

1 District of Columbia v. Heller.
2 McDonald v. City of Chicago.
3 Yourish et al., “State Gun Laws Enacted in the Year After Newtown.”
4 According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, the 16 states that ban the carrying of concealed weapons on campus are: California, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, North Dakota, South Carolina, and Wyoming.
5 See Students for Concealed Carry.
6 Yourish et al., “State Gun Laws Enacted in the Year After Newtown.”
7 Hand, “Statement Opposing ‘Campus Carry’ Laws.”
8 Modern Language Association, “MLA Joins in Opposing Campus Carry Legislation.”
9 Cortez-Neavel, “Campus Carry Debate Plays Out in House Hearing.”
10 See the website http://cocksnotglocks.org.
12 The law takes effect for public community colleges on August 1, 2017. Respondents remain anonymous here for obvious reasons.
15 Chronicle of Higher Education, “The Student-Centered University: Pressures and Challenges Faced by College Presidents and Student Affairs Leaders.”
16 Zhang et al., Bureau of Justice Statistics Indicators of School Crime and Safety: 2015.
17 Johnson, Pipelines, Pathways, and Institutional Leadership: An Update on the Status of Women in Higher Education.
18 Arntz et al., “The Slow Road to Salary Gains.”
19 Ballard-Reisch, “Kansas Health Foundation Distinguished Chair Leaves Wichita State University Because of Kansas Campus Concealed Carry Law.”

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