Insecurity on Campus

What colleges aren’t telling could hurt you.

This story was reported and written by a team of journalism students at Southern Methodist University and the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism at the University of North Texas. The SMU team included Megan Connolly, Christine Dao, Farrar Johnson, Pablo Lastra, Jennifer McDowell, and Jessica Savage. At UNT, the team included Shalandys Anderson, Rebecca Ekpe, Jaclyn Gonzales, Christina Jancic, Elizabeth Lee, Lindsay Marshall, Brooke Scoggins, Hannah Seddelmeyer and Taylor Timmins. Texas Christian University student Melissa Christensen also contributed to this report.

Except for its violent conclusion, the warm Friday on the University of Texas at Arlington campus a year and a half ago might have passed as a typical spring evening on any college campus. Four friends — three young women and one young man, all students at UTA — piled into a car, headed for a couple of parties. The man, a UTA student we’ll call Tom, and one of the women, a 19-year-old freshman honor student we’ll call Lisa, sipped on Crown and Coke in the back seat as their friends drove them to a fraternity party at Tia’s Tex Mex. When that party ended around 2 a.m., the group returned to their car and set out for a frat house party not far from Lisa’s room at Lipscomb Dorm on the UTA campus.

By 3:30 a.m., Lisa was partied out. She felt sick and wanted to go home. Tom, a friend she’d met during the previous semester, walked with her. When they got to Lipscomb, he even came in with her, to make sure, he told her, that “she did not pass out and strangle while being sick.” Inside, Lisa went to the bathroom, changed into pajamas, and sat down on the edge of her bed. Tom placed a plastic wastebasket in front of her, and she promptly threw up into it. She returned to the bathroom, brushed her teeth, and was hoping to crawl into bed when the young man who had pretended to be looking after her revealed his true intentions.

Tom grabbed Lisa, fell onto the bed on top of her, and began pulling off her pajamas. Lisa fought back and screamed. But Tom was overpowering. He stripped and entered her, and held her head down, covered with a pillow, to muffle the screams. Lisa went limp, hoping Tom would think she had passed out and that he would quit. But Tom kept on, and Lisa began to struggle again. Even as she screamed “no,” he told her, “You want it.” She screamed again, then cursed: “You fucking asshole.” And as Tom continued to rape her, he yelled back,
“No, bitch. You’re the one getting fucked.” Then Tom grabbed Lisa’s hair, slammed her head on the headboard, and knocked her unconscious.

When Lisa regained consciousness seven hours later, her head was pounding with confusion. The man she considered a friend had beaten and raped her. At first she didn’t know what to do. On Saturday evening, she broke down in tears. Sunday morning, she confided in a girlfriend, then went to the campus police station and reported that she had been raped. Officers returned to her room to gather evidence — the blue sheets from her bed, the case from the pillow that had been pressed against her head, a pair of men’s green Hanes briefs, and a contact lens case — and filed the five-page report from which this account is taken.

What the campus police did not do — and what advocates maintain the federal law required them to do — was to inform the UTA community that a young woman had reported being raped and beaten unconscious in her dormitory room and that the fellow student she accused of sexually assaulting her remained at large, a potential danger to others. Lisa’s rape was among seven reported to UTA police between 2001 and 2003.

But students never received a campus-wide alert about Lisa’s rape or about another that also occurred in Lipscomb Hall. Why? Because, according to police officials, both were “date rapes” in which the victim and alleged perpetrator knew each other. It’s a distinction that college officials often make — and that makes rape experts and victims’ advocates furious.

Even without a campus-wide alert, some students might have learned of the rapes through daily crime logs that campus police compile. However, the rapes were listed in the logs only as “assaults.” UTA Assistant Police Chief James Ferguson’s only explanation was that police personnel who compile the logs don’t always have access to complete information.

Neither rape has been prosecuted. Tom was no-billed by a grand jury, and the accused assailant in the second rape remains under investigation.

The Clery Act — a federal law named after Jeanne Ann Clery, a college student who was raped, sodomized, tortured, and murdered in her dorm room in 1986 — requires universities to disclose campus crime statistics, publish daily crime logs, and distribute crime alerts to warn students and others of dangerous situations. But a statewide review — by journalism students at Southern Methodist University and the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism at the University of North Texas — found widespread non-compliance.

At many colleges, officials are failing to inform students about violent crime in and around their campuses. Last year, for instance, SMU police reported the rape of one student as an illness. SMU failed to issue alerts in four other rape cases because they said the assaults were date rapes — and that the alleged perpetrators therefore posed no threat to other students. El Centro College in Dallas does not notify students when a rape or other violent crime takes place at one of its satellite campuses, even though it has one of the highest crime rates among Texas colleges. And the two UTA rapes that campus police failed to tell students about were listed on the crime logs in the same category as water balloon fights.
Some other North Texas universities appeared to be doing a better job. A preliminary review of the University of North Texas and Texas Christian University, for example, showed that both schools appeared to be reporting the same information to the U.S. Department of Education that they shared with their students.

At other campuses, reporters were repeatedly denied permission to look at records, or the release was delayed for weeks, or only partial records were provided. In the Dallas County Community College system alone, responses to questions about crime records varied dramatically. Officers at two campuses said that the police keep a daily crime log but don’t let anyone see it. At Richland Community College, an officer said that the chief decides who gets to see the log of police activity. And at North Lake Community College, officials said that they follow the Clery Act “like it’s their Bible,” but then told a student reporter he would have to file an open records request to see the crime log. None of those responses is allowed under Clery.

In effect, many campus officials are misinterpreting or ignoring parts of the Clery Act in ways that leave their students in the dark about potential dangers, thereby undercutting the original purpose of the law. At one community college campus in Houston, for instance, students weren’t told about any of seven homicides that the college reported, as required, to the federal government. The college said it wasn’t required to alert its students to those crimes because the deaths didn’t occur on the campus proper, but in a nearby high-crime area.

Those findings don’t surprise S. Daniel Carter, senior vice president of Security on Campus, Inc., the Pennsylvania non-profit organization founded by Jeanne Ann Clery’s parents for the purpose of improving safety on college campuses.

“It’s not that the police don’t want to [report the crimes],’’ Carter said, “It’s that they are put under pressure not to.’’

Daniel Carter, Ben Clery, Connie Clery, Catherine Bath, and Sarah Forti of Security on Campus, Inc. (Courtesy of Security On Campus, Inc.)

Clery was a 19-year-old freshman at Pennsylvania’s Lehigh University when she was raped and killed on campus. In the aftermath of Jeanne’s death, her parents, Howard and Connie, learned that almost 40 violent crimes had taken place on the Lehigh campus in the three previous years — and that students had been informed of none of them. Joining forces with other campus crime victims, the Clery family lobbied Congress to require colleges to disclose information about crime on campuses. Their effort resulted in the Crime Awareness and Campus Security Act of 1990, which eventually became known simply as the Clery Act.
Carter said the law is designed to make sure that students and their families are fully informed about potential dangers on campus, and to prevent college officials from hiding the facts. The Clery Act is intended primarily to address the campus, he said, “because before, that is where school had the most power to keep info bottled up.” The act “made this information public.”

After concerns about faulty crime reporting were raised earlier this year, the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas offered to help journalism students across the state examine Clery Act compliance at public and private universities. As part of that “Light of Day” project, SMU and UNT students compiled statistics for violent and property crimes on more than 100 campuses and nearby public properties for 2001 to 2003.

The federal law is intended, in part, to give students and their parents enough information about crime rates at and near colleges to make good decisions about where to go to school. But the UNT and SMU reporters found that many colleges make that very difficult. Texas Wesleyan University, for example, delayed inspection of its records for weeks by insisting that the material wasn’t public. Texas Woman’s University made records for only the last year available for inspection, and said records from previous years, which other universities routinely maintain and make available, had been destroyed.

The Clery Act requires that only basic information be provided about each crime. At public universities, students could theoretically get additional information from the offense reports maintained by most campus police and security forces. Texas law makes such information public — but some university officials also make it expensive. For example, the student who learned that UTA police had failed to report Lisa’s rape to the campus was billed $129 for records that other tax-supported universities give away. And some universities, including UTA, remove not only the names of crime victims and perpetrators but also the location of the crime, further masking facts that would help students and their parents assess the potential danger at that campus.

At Texas Woman’s University in Denton, police reported to the federal government that three students said they were raped between 2001 and 2003. When the university made copies of its actual police reports available for inspection, however, it was clear that TWU had failed to report a fourth case in which a 20-year-old woman was raped by a 21-year-old man who talked his way into her dormitory room in February 2001. The woman reported the crime to police, but police didn’t include the report in the information they gave the department of education.

“It should have been included, but it wasn’t,” said Texas Woman’s University public safety director John Erwin. “It was an error.”

It was not possible to determine how many, if any, of those four rapes were reported on crime logs that TWU students can access, or if crime alerts were issued regarding them. The department made crime logs available only for 2003; records for 2001 and 2002, when the four rapes were reported, have been destroyed.

“My reading of the [Clery] act does not require us to keep the logs themselves for more than one year, so what you saw is all that I have available,” Erwin said.

At some private universities, it’s even harder to get an accurate picture of campus crime because many officials maintain that their police reports are not public — despite the fact that they function like small-town police departments, and some are licensed by a state police agency.
The information Baylor gave the federal government under Clery consistently contradicted the information it gave its own campus about rapes, burglaries and assaults. Texas Wesleyan University, which has two campuses in Fort Worth, has yet to respond to an open records request. And when that university finally made its daily logs of crime available for inspection, the records showed Wesleyan had failed to tell students about a rape that occurred in 2001. In stark contrast, TCU police said Tuesday that they would make their offense reports public within a week.

Pete Slover, a board member of the Texas Freedom of Information Foundation and a reporter at The Dallas Morning News, said private universities should be required to turn over the same crime information as public schools. “When the state certifies a police officer at a public university, that cop’s activities are public business. It shouldn’t be any different at a private school: same gun, same badge, same state-issued arrest power,” he said. FOI Foundation president Joel White agreed. “No one would expect police to be able to hide crime records from the public just because they’re at a private school,” he said.

On April 11, 2003, a student at Southern Methodist University told police she had been sexually assaulted in Moore Hall on campus. SMU police never issued a crime alert notifying students about what had happened. Five months later, another SMU student reported being sexually assaulted at the Sigma Chi fraternity house. Once again, campus police failed to issue a campus-wide alert.

The inaction was not unusual. Over the past three years, SMU police have received reports that at least five female students were sexually assaulted on campus. But police issued a campus-wide alert only once, even though the Clery Act requires them to broadcast such notices when crimes occur that are “considered by the institution to represent a threat to students and employees.”

Many SMU students said police should notify them whenever a student is attacked. “The facts need to be made public for the safety of SMU’s female population,” said Davenna Ward, sophomore president of the SMU Resident Hall Association. “If the SMU Police Department is willing to publish reports about other issues that go on at SMU, they should be held accountable for putting this information out as well.”

Michael Snellgrove, SMU police chief since 2003, said his department did the right thing by not notifying students about the sexual assaults. The chief said he did not believe the men who reportedly raped the women in April and September represented a threat to students because in each case the victim knew her attacker. “We don’t necessarily have to put them [campus-wide crime alerts] out for acquaintance rapes, because we recognize who the suspect is,” he said.

Many students and health professionals said this policy makes little sense. They pointed out that in the vast majority of sexual assaults, the victim knows the rapist.

“An acquaintance rape is just as much a crime as anything else,” said Emily Long, a first-year student at SMU. “If more people are informed about this type of crime, they will be able to protect themselves better.”
The U.S. Department of Justice recently released a study showing that as many as one in every four college women will be sexually victimized during their years on campus—and that 90 percent of victims know their attackers.

Snellgrove is unmoved by these facts. But he said his department would immediately issue a campus-wide crime alert if a rape victim did not know her attacker. The SMU police department, he said, has “never put out a campus-wide crime alert for acquaintance rape, but we wouldn’t hesitate if the suspect was a stranger.”

That’s not what happened last year. On Nov. 22, an SMU student reported she was sexually assaulted in a campus parking garage. It was not until four days later — after the SMU student newspaper published a story about the reported rape — that police finally issued a campus-wide crime alert. Many SMU students were outraged by the delay.

Dr. James Caswell, vice president of student affairs, said that in the future, police should issue an electronic alert within 24 hours after a student reports a sexual assault. “It does make sense to alert the campus in this manner,” Caswell said. “In retrospect, I think it [the campus alert] took too long.”

Chief Snellgrove acknowledged that students and faculty want crime information immediately. “The community, regardless of how little information we may have about the case, still wants to know that the crime occurred as soon as possible,” he said. Nevertheless, Snellgrove said the police department will continue to follow his policy of not issuing a crime alert when an acquaintance rape is reported.

Campus security experts said that’s not the best way to protect students.

“The police don’t have to name names. An alert that simply includes the time and location of the crime can raise awareness about the problem,” said Catherine Bath, executive director of Security On Campus, Inc. Alerts “make students safe, by giving them the tools to take precautions. If more students knew that these crimes occurred, they could avoid being victimized.” She said SMU’s policy is inconsistent with the spirit of the Clery Act.

Several SMU students said the police department’s policy of not issuing crime alerts following acquaintance rapes sends the wrong message. “Treating acquaintance rape with less gravity is careless,” said sophomore Lauren Goodson. “Not only would I personally want to know about this crime, but the SMU Police Department should have no hesitation to release a campus-wide alert.”

Last spring, one SMU student had particular reason to be upset over SMU’s crime alert policies. In April, the 19-year-old sophomore was raped by a stranger after leaving an on-campus charity event. About a half hour after she arrived at her home at the nearby Carlyle Apartments, a man entered through a side door and attacked her.

Although she couldn’t identify her rapist, she was convinced he had followed her from SMU. But when she called college police, they told her they could do nothing because the crime had occurred off-campus. SMU police never issued an alert about the sexual assault. Nor was it listed in the department’s daily activity log.

Snellgrove said his department acted properly, because it’s responsible for providing security only inside campus boundaries. “Because the crime did not occur in our jurisdiction, we cannot
investigate,” he said. “If there is any way we can help them [the victims] get in touch with the proper authority, we will.”

Carter, of Security on Campus, said the SMU inaction was indefensible and not in line with what many other campuses do.

In a letter to Snellgrove, Carter said, “This incident was reported to you, so this isn’t a situation where the campus police were ignorant of something being handled by another agency. It was in a heavily student-populated area, and may have involved one of your students being targeted on campus and followed to their apartment. Your attitude that there is simply nothing you can do about this type of report is simply pathetic.”

Snellgrove declined to comment on Carter’s letter.

Unlike SMU police, the Carlyle Apartments took action immediately to notify other tenants of the assault, posting notices within 48 hours to alert residents that an “attempted rape” had occurred in the complex.

The young woman remains angry at SMU for its failure to alert students after she was assaulted and for its treatment of her.

“The school couldn’t have cared less,” she said.

The story is very different at the University of Texas at Austin. Unlike SMU, the UT-Austin police department takes a much broader approach to notifying the campus community when a student has been a victim of crime. If a student reports that he or she has been sexually assaulted, whether or not the attacker was an acquaintance, whether on or off campus, UT police issue a campus-wide crime alert. College officials said their policy is designed to follows the letter and spirit of the Clery Act.

In fact, UT went after and got a federal grant for a program called Voices Against Violence that actually resulted in increased reporting of rapes in the UT area. Rapes on or near the UT-Austin campus totaled 24 in 2001, 25 in 2002 and 10 in 2003. But in 2002, thanks to the work of Voices Against Violence, an additional 97 rapes of UT students at other locations were also reported, and a program official said preliminary statistics show that that number increased in 2003.

University officials credit Voices Against Violence with helping convince victims of rape and sexual abuse to come forward, and then providing them with counseling and other resources. UT crime prevention officer William Pieper said the university encourages students to report sexual assaults and gives several presentations each week on the topic.

Unfortunately, the program’s grant was not renewed in 2004, and important parts of its work will end in June as a result. Data on the off-campus rapes (beyond what the Clery Act covers) will no longer be collected; the advocacy work and training of faculty and staff to deal with sexual assault victims will also stop.
“We were shocked” at the funds cut-off, said program coordinator Pamela Cook. Although the Clery Act is valuable, she said, it captures only a fraction of what is happening, especially at a college like UT-Austin, where the vast majority of the students live off-campus. Clery Act statistics “are not a good indicator of what’s going on with our students,” she said. For instance, although the number of rapes reported under Clery went down in 2003, Cook said, early figures indicate that the number of off-campus rapes went up in that year.

Crime of any sort is almost nonexistent at some small Texas campuses. “Honey, we haven’t had so much as a wallet stolen here since I can remember,” said one officer at tiny Arlington Baptist College, a four-year Bible school with an enrollment under 200.

Still, at many campuses, crime remains a persistent problem. There were about 300 rapes, 700 robberies, and 1,000 aggravated assaults reported on Texas campuses during the three-year period. Across the state, just nine college-related homicides were reported. But seven of those were reported in one neighborhood near two related community colleges in Houston. Those same two campuses also reported 10 rapes and hundreds of robberies, assaults, burglaries, and car thefts between 2001 and 2003.

The Houston Community College System encompasses some 37,000 students spread among five main colleges and numerous satellite campuses, including the one at Northline Mall in northeast Houston. At peak hours, more than 1,500 students fill the halls and classrooms in a refurbished department store. The campus is adjacent to low-income housing — and that, campus officials say, is where all the murders were committed that they reported to the U.S. Department of Education, as required by Clery.

Campus officials also claimed to have no information on the identities of those killed or the circumstances of their deaths. Police Chief Louis Duran said the figure his department reported to the federal government came from Houston police, who patrol the high-crime housing development. When Houston police were asked for copies of the offense reports documenting those murders, they said the information the college reported was insufficient to identify the cases.

Duran said his campus is as safe as others located in Houston’s urban high-crime communities. “You need to understand the animal here,” he said, “Houston is a violent city and a mecca for parolees.”

He acknowledged the security problems posed by the porous nature of a community college system with classrooms dotting a major metropolitan area. “Our campuses are wide open to the public,” Duran said. “They’re not controlled campuses like the University of Houston. They’ve got borders. Rice [University], you can’t really go walking through there. Ours is an open institution. Walk, crawl, they’re going to let you in at HCCS.”

However, he bridled at the suggestion that his system had one of the highest crime rates in the state. “When someone tells you that crime at HCC is high, you better ask ... at U of Houston and TSU, and we’ll compare our on-site stats with their on-site stats.”

(During the same period that HCC’s Northline-area campuses reported seven homicides on nearby public property, the University of Houston’s four campuses reported one and Texas Southern University reported none.)
Some students said they fear for their safety on the Northline campus and that police do a poor job of alerting them to potential dangers. Angelic Azzam attends classes at both the Central and Northline Mall campuses of HCCS. She has no safety concerns at Central, she said, but often worries when she sets foot on Northline. She said she was unaware of the seven homicides.

“It’s kinda scary,” she said. “I have to look at my back every once in a while.”

Another urban school with a crime problem is El Centro College in downtown Dallas, part of the Dallas County Community College System. Most of its classes are held in a nine-story building that looks more like a corporate headquarters than a college campus. It also has more than a dozen satellite campuses that in recent years have included the Federal Reserve Bank in Dallas and even the Greyhound bus terminal.

The El Centro web site boasts that it offers “upscale education” at the cheapest tuition rate in the Metroplex. It doesn’t mention that El Centro has one of the highest crime rates among Texas colleges, according to a computer-assisted analysis conducted by UNT and SMU journalism students using crime data submitted by El Centro to the federal government. Between 2001 and 2003, El Centro experienced one crime for every 18 students — and one violent crime for every 55 students. Those crimes included 30 rapes, 110 robberies, 144 aggravated assaults, and 285 burglaries.

El Centro Police Chief Calvin Richard, however, said those statistics are incorrect. He said the actual number of crimes at El Centro was much lower: 6 rapes; 21 robberies; 26 aggravated assaults; 45 burglaries. Richard said he reported the wrong data to federal officials in 2001 and 2002, but they never corrected the errors -- even after he provided them with correct information.

Whatever the actual crime rate, El Centro students said they generally feel safe within the school building and even outside, where many of them wait for DART buses after class and often are approached by panhandlers.

Most of the school’s crime occurs at its satellite campuses. According to Richard’s revised numbers for 2002, the satellite campuses reported 15 aggravated assaults, 15 burglaries, 6 car thefts, and 4 sexual assaults — or 63 percent of all such crime. Federal law requires that school officials report any crimes at these locations if they occur while classes are being held.

Yet, Richard said, his department has never issued an alert for a crime that took place at a satellite campus. Richard said he would issue such an alert if needed, but that he’s never heard of an incident that he believed warranted it. “Would I alert students that there’s a threat in the area? In a heartbeat.” he said.

Jeanne Ann Cleary’s parents would have appreciated such an alert. They were shocked to learn, as they said later, that campus crime was one of “the best-kept secrets in the country.” In fact, until 1988 only 4 percent of colleges and universities reported crime statistics to the FBI, let alone to students and parents. “I knew I had to do something because Jeanne was so precious,” said Connie Clery, Jeanne’s mother. “I had to do something so that others would not suffer through something like this.”

With the help of Texas victims’ rights expert Ann Seymour, the Clerys established Security on Campus, a nonprofit organization dedicated to preventing crime on college campuses. “When Jeanne died, the role of universities was laissez faire and cover up,” said Connie Clery, who lives in
Pennsylvania. “They just didn’t seem to care. What they did seem to care about was their image and keeping enrollment high,”

In 1988, Pennsylvania became the first state to pass legislation that required all colleges and universities to alert their students when campus crime occurred. Howard Clery authored most of the legislation. Security on Campus continued to push for similar legislation in states throughout the country.

“By the time we got to the 12th law passed, I just knew I would never live to go through 50 states, so we decided to press for federal legislation,” Connie Clery said.

“It was extremely difficult because the colleges and universities throughout the whole country fought us tooth and nail, trying to prevent us from getting any of our legislation passed at every bend of the road,” she said. “They were so much more powerful than we were, but what we had was the American public — mothers and fathers and friends who really cared about protecting the kids.”

In 1990, President George H.W. Bush signed the law that eventually has since been amended five times and in 1998 was renamed the Jeanne Clery Act.

Connie Clery said she believes the tide has turned — parents now know to ask questions about crime at their kids’ colleges, and “a good many of the schools” are helping. But much remains to be done.

“I don’t think you will ever be able to have truthful and accurate information until we are sure that all colleges—or the great majority—are really telling the truth,” she said. “At this point, I feel that that is impossible to gauge.”

This database (click to download: Excel format) shows violent and non-violent crimes on more than 100 Texas college campuses and nearby public properties. As part of the “Light of Day” project sponsored by the Freedom of Information Foundation of Texas, the database was compiled by journalism students at Southern Methodist University and the Mayborn Graduate Institute of Journalism at the University of North Texas, based on information provided by colleges to the U.S. Department of Education. The SMU team included Megan Connolly, Christine Dao, Farrar Johnson, Pablo Lastra, Jennifer McDowell, and Jessica Savage. At UNT, the team included Shalandys Anderson, Rebecca Ekpe, Jaclyn Gonzales, Christina Jancic, Elizabeth Lee, Lindsay Marshall, Brooke Scoggins, Hannah Seddelmeyer and Taylor Timmins. Fort Worth Weekly intern Brooke Gray also contributed to the effort.

Note that the database has two sets of figures for El Centro in Dallas – one posted on the DOE website that the college says is incorrect and a second that the college says contains the correct information.

If you have questions or comments about the database, contact Dan Malone at dan.malone@fwweekly.com or Craig Flournoy at cflourno@mail.smu.edu. For more information about a particular school, search under Crime Statistics at http://www.securityoncampus.org.