Report of Consultation

University of Vermont, Division of Student Affairs

April 11-12, 2007

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Introduction

At the invitation of Dr. Thomas Gustafson, Vice President for Student Affairs at the University of Vermont, we were asked to visit the campus in Burlington on April 11-12, 2007 for the purposes of reviewing the institution’s response to the October, 2006 murder of a Vermont student, Michelle Gardner-Quinn, and of assisting the institution enhance its safety and security plans and procedures for the future. A third member of the invited consultation team, Ms. Vicky Storm, Chief of Police at the University of Washington, was unable to come to Burlington, due to a problem on her campus.

After reviewing information about the campus before our visit, and after conversations with Dr. Gustafson, we agreed upon the meeting schedule for the consultation. Beginning at 7:30 a.m. on April 11, we met with members of the student affairs staff; law enforcement officials from Burlington and the University; members of theProvost’s office; the Chief of Staff from the President’s office; members of the Administrative and Facilities Services staff; members of the Diversity and Equity Unit; members of the Communications staff; and with student leaders. We also reviewed organizational charts, policy documents, reports on safety and security, and institutional policies. On April 12, we joined with approximately 70 members of the Burlington and University of Vermont community in a “summit meeting” from 9:00 a.m. to noon, where open discussion on safety and security occurred, and where specific suggestions for improving safety and security were generated, via use of small group discussions. The consultants also offered their observations and suggestions regarding the responses of the community and the campus to safety and security issues. After this meeting, the consultants conferred with Dr. Gustafson and other key leaders, and the on-campus consultation was concluded. It was agreed that a written report would be submitted to Dr. Gustafson, and all participants in the summit meeting were encouraged to send any additional thoughts and suggestions they might have to the consultants.

This report has two sections: first, a set of observations about the community and the University of Vermont are presented; and second, a list of suggestions about enhancing safety and security are offered.
Observations:

1. The University of Vermont and Burlington experienced a terrible tragedy when Michelle Gardner-Quinn, a Vermont student from Arlington, Virginia, was raped and murdered on October 26, 2006. The responses of the community and the University were magnificent, reflecting the humane and caring values of these communities. The President’s office, the student affairs division, the Burlington and the University Police departments, the University’s student body, and the citizens of Burlington demonstrated professional competence and compassion. These thoughtful responses emerged from prior planning and practice, but also from genuine feelings of care from all. The follow up and continued contacts with the family and friends of Michelle, led by Dean Annie Stevens, are also notable. In the face of this tragedy, members of the Burlington and the University of Vermont communities deserve praise and respect for their responses.

2. The two police agencies involved in this tragedy – the Burlington Police Department and the University Police Department, worked together in a very professional and personal manner, which greatly enhanced the effectiveness of the responses. Chief Gary Margolis and Chief Thomas Tremblay made this happen, and this cooperation is essential in a setting where the University and the community are so closely engaged with one another. This type of cooperation is not always present in other university-community settings, and the level of mutual respect and cooperation in Burlington/UVM is a fine asset.

3. The close, personal, and trusting relationships among leaders in the Burlington community and the University of Vermont were critical in the effectiveness of the response to this tragedy. There were very good written procedures and policies in place beforehand, but such plans could not have worked as well without these close relationships having already been established for many years. They were the key factor in the ability of the Burlington/UVM community to respond effectively to this tragedy.

4. The University of Vermont already has in place excellent policies, procedures, and services regarding safety and security. These reflect careful planning and coordination on the campus among administration, faculty, and students. Moreover, there has been cooperation with Burlington community and police leaders. As the University and the community move forward in enhancing their commitment to these policies, procedures, and services, they can be confident that they already have a sound foundation to build upon.

5. In virtually all of our conversations, there was an acknowledgment that the University of Vermont/Burlington is a special place. Its reputation as a university community of high academic quality in a very attractive setting is well deserved and of long standing. This is a tremendous asset and a source of great pride, and should continue to be a strong stimulus in further cooperative efforts to address
safety and security issues.

6. The students at the University of Vermont are talented, civic minded, and committed to their institution. This is a very valuable asset for the University, and students have already made valuable contributions to campus and community services, programs, and policies regarding safety and security. Their continued involvement in efforts to address these issues will be very important to the success of the University and the community.

7. The administrative staff of the University and officials from the Burlington community are firmly committed to issues of safety and security and are determined to do what is necessary to improve their services and programs. The positive attitudes of these professionals is very impressive, as is their eagerness to learn from one another, from other institutions, and from the latest technology. These leaders are very good at what they do, and students, faculty, and community members will benefit in the future when these leaders share their knowledge and insights more often.

Some Suggestions:

1. The expectations of the University of Vermont and the Burlington community regarding safety and security have not always been communicated very clearly. Students need to hear clear messages about alcohol abuse and expected behavior and its consequences. Coordination and cooperation are excellent, but sometimes it has been difficult to get messages across clearly to students and community members. The University has a high quality communications division, and new ways need to be explored to transmit information and expectations to students and to the community. When the President of the University is actively engaged in the communication about safety and security, students and members of the community will understand that this is a high priority for the institution.

2. The University of Vermont already has completed some valuable assessments of its safety and security climate, and some of these reports contain excellent suggestions for improving services, staffing, policies, and programs. We sensed some feelings of frustration and confusion among some members of the university community as to why actions had not been implemented regarding these reports. While we applaud the University and the community for their continuing efforts to address these issues and to seek additional suggestions, we believe there is ample information and expertise now in place to take action.

3. The University of Vermont and Burlington are, indeed, special places, and have well deserved reputations as almost ideal places to study, live, and recreate. However, in 2007, neither is immune to the same kinds of physical and emotional violence experienced in more urban areas of the United States. This is an
unpleasant reality for some members of this university community to accept, but it must be acknowledged, both publicly and privately if improvements in safety and security are to be made. The University of Vermont is one of the oldest and most distinguished institutions of higher education in the Northeast, and enjoys very strong support from the public. It is an institution that is strong enough to talk openly about the safety and security problems it is experiencing, and to share with its various constituencies what it is doing to address these problems. By doing so, its already positive trust with prospective students, their parents, and others will be enhanced.

4. Alcohol abuse is a serious concern among members of the University of Vermont and Burlington community. While this difficult and serious problem continues to plague other universities, our observation is that the problem may be more acute at the University of Vermont than at many other institutions. The University and the community are keenly aware of this problem, and of the difficulties it presents in so many other areas, including violence toward women. The expectations of the University and of the community toward alcohol abuse must be clearly communicated to students and their parents, and if new policies and procedures are introduced, they should be consistently enforced. Whatever the University and the community decide is the best solution to this problem, it will certainly require the cooperative and concerted efforts of both.

5. The emotional pain experienced by members of the University of Vermont and Burlington community because of gender, sexual orientation, disability, or race should be acknowledged by leaders and efforts should continue to be made to make the climate more inclusive, sensitive, and caring. When such pain is experienced, it is a form of violence in its own right, and significantly affects not only the quality of life for these injured individuals, but also for all. It is urged that leaders in the University and Burlington communities become more forthright about this matter.

6. There are many creative and effective efforts that are now in place regarding safety and security at the University of Vermont and in the Burlington community. In some cases, however, there appear to be “pockets” where useful things are being done, but these are not well known, appreciated, or well communicated with other programs. While not suggesting some “top-down” structure to be imposed, it is clear that the overall coordination among these several efforts could be improved. Several people we visited with mentioned the possibility of a for-credit course for freshmen that would include substantive information about safety and security; this might be explored by the University as another option for getting its messages across effectively to students.

7. During our visit, we did not meet with members of the Faculty Senate or with members of the teaching staff. Faculty, of course, are the academic heart of any university, and they can be a tremendous asset to the institution’s efforts in safety and security. Both in the classroom and in their roles as advisers to students and
student organizations, faculty can have an important impact in helping students and in supporting them as they grow into young adulthood. Faculty should be significantly involved in any efforts to improve and implement programs in safety and security at the University of Vermont and in the Burlington community.

We appreciate the opportunity to participate in this consultation. We hope that our comments will be of some value as the University of Vermont and the Burlington community continue to address the issues of safety and security.