

UFF-UCF Resolution on Allowing Firearms in the Classroom (Re: HB 4005 and SB 176)

Approved at the UFF-UCF Council Meeting, February 19, 2015

Creating and fostering a safe learning environment is the first duty of any school. Scholars of learning continually stress the importance of safety in the learning environment. Their studies show that students who do not feel safe at school also have trouble completing work and learning in class. When fear increases, learning outcomes decline. UCF recognizes this truth by enshrining the value of a safe learning environment in its Golden Rule Creed: "I will promote an open and supportive campus environment by respecting the rights and contributions of every individual."

HB 4005 threatens the rights of every individual at a college or university. The passage of this bill would create an atmosphere of fear, suspicion, and intimidation. Allowing guns in the classroom would create a profound threat to our entire educational enterprise by instilling a permanent state of pre-occupation in which teachers and learners would be distracted from the lessons at hand. Those with firearms would be preoccupied with concerns about whether their firearm is properly secured, whether someone else poses a possible threat, and whether they should respond to that possible threat with a firearm. Everyone else would be preoccupied wondering which other people have firearms, whether these firearm are secure, whether the people with firearms are in their right state of mind, whether people with firearms will mistake an environmental element (such as a loud noise or a disturbance in the hallway) as a threat that requires a firearm as a response. Educators and students are not reassured by the presence of firearms in the classroom. Far from it, we are terrified.

Colleges and universities are places in which safety is required to discuss difficult and controversial topics, such as religion, race, politics, and sexuality. The presence of firearms during such sensitive discussions raises the stakes considerably. Passions get activated in these situations. As educators, we want people to use their words, not their firearms, to deal with their thoughts and feelings.

As faculty members at the nation's second largest university, we are terrified by the possibility of firearms in our classroom. Not only are we afraid of the tremendously increased likelihood of being shot at our place of work, we are also afraid of our students being hurt by accidents and mistakes involving firearms.

While advocates for this bill have argued that the need for self-defense justifies introducing in the classroom, this argument makes little sense in light of the following facts:

1. At a college or university, it would be nearly impossible to encounter a situation in which a "good guy with a gun" stops "a bad guy with a gun." Most

students at 21 have not reached mental maturity (the frontal lobe of the brain, which is the seat of reason, does not finish maturing until about age 25). Most young people are neither “good” nor “bad,” but are often confused, use poor judgment, make errors, get upset over seemingly trivial things, etc. Furthermore, arming students is not a proven way to reduce the numbers of mass shootings. If students brandish firearms during a mass shooting, they will likely shoot innocent bystanders or be shot by police who mistake them for the shooter.

2. Students have a much higher than average rate of suicide, alcoholism, and emotional problems than other people. Allowing them to be armed is to put all of our lives in greater danger. Here are a few statistics:
 - a. One in four young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 have a diagnosable mental illness. More than 25 percent of college students have been diagnosed or treated by a professional for a mental health condition within the past year.
 - b. More than 40 percent of college students have felt more than an average amount of stress within the past 12 months.
 - c. More than 80 percent of college students felt overwhelmed by all they had to do in the past year and 45 percent have felt things were hopeless.
 - d. Almost 73 percent of students living with a mental health condition experienced a mental health crisis on campus. Yet 34.2 percent reported that their college did not know about their crisis.
 - e. Colleges across the country have reported large increases in enrollment. At the same time, college counseling centers have also observed an increase in the prevalence and severity of mental health issues experienced by students and an increase in the number of students taking psychotropic medications.
 - f. 31 percent of college students have felt so depressed in the past year that it was difficult to function and more than 50 percent have felt overwhelming anxiety, making it hard to succeed academically.
 - g. Overall, 40 percent of students with diagnosable mental health conditions did not seek help.
 - h. 7 percent of college students have “seriously considered suicide” during the past year.
 - i. Suicide is the 3rd leading cause of death on college campuses.
http://www.nami.org/content/navigationmenu/find_support/nami_on_campus1/learn_about_the_issue/learn_about_the_issue.htm

Many of the most staunch firearm rights advocates have recognized the danger posed by the combination of firearms and mental illness. In an environment with as much mental illness as colleges and universities, the risks are simply too great to ignore.

3. There is virtually no way to use a firearm effectively in a classroom setting, even if there were an active shooter present. The chances of hitting another person are far too great. Beyond that, the likelihood that a concealed weapon could be misused in an educational setting is far too real. Students themselves say that they and their peers are often hungry, angry, or tired, that they lack good judgment, and that they have accidents with less dangerous items all the time.
4. Universities could be liable for damages if handguns are used to hurt or threaten people on campus.
5. This bill is a re-wording of a “model bill” that was written by ALEC, which was co-chaired by the NRA. See http://alecexposed.org/w/images/9/90/711-Campus_Personal_Protection_Act_Exposed.pdf. We believe that schools should be free of outside pressure from political organizations that seek to advance their own interests without regard for the wellbeing of students and faculty.

Many proponents cite the risk of mass shootings on campuses as a reason to pass these bills. While the threat of a mass shooting is very real, we believe that such cases need to be put in perspective. Mass shootings and slaughters on campuses have increased over the past few years and they get a lot of attention, but they still make up only a tiny fraction of shootings and of casualties. Witness the following statistics on mass shootings: “The FBI report found a total of 1,043 casualties [from mass shootings during the past 14 years], with 486 killed and 557 wounded.” <http://www.latimes.com/nation/nationnow/la-nn-na-mass-shootings-fbi-20140924-story.html>. Now compare those numbers to these on other kinds of shootings <http://www.gunpolicy.org/firearms/region/united-states>:

- a. In the U.S., annual deaths resulting from firearms total 2011: 32,163
- b. In the U.S., annual firearm homicides total 2012: 8,896
- c. In the U.S., according to figures from the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), annual handgun homicides total 2012: 6,371
- d. In the U.S., annual firearm suicides total 2011: 19,766
- e. In the U.S., annual unintentional shooting deaths by handgun total 2010: 91
- f. In the U.S., the reported, or estimated annual number of non-fatal firearm injuries is 2012: 81,396

Mass shootings in America kill roughly 35 people per year. That number is far too high and we should seek ways to lower it. Nevertheless, it is a very small number compared to the vast numbers of people killed and wounded by the proliferation of firearms. This bill would increase the proliferation of firearms to one of the most vital and sensitive areas in civic life—the classroom—thereby greatly increasing the dangers posed to students and faculty as well as to the entire enterprise of education itself.