

Changing gun laws raise new questions on campus

University of Idaho task force aims to alleviate uncertainty surrounding new state law permitting concealed weapons on college properties

Elizabeth Rudd/Lewiston Tribune

MOSCOW - Questions stemming from the soon-to-be-implemented "guns on campus" law are wide ranging and answers are a bit uncertain.

Finding the answers is what a group of University of Idaho officials have been asked to do as part of a 14-member task force established by President Chuck Staben last month.

The task force has been assigned to evaluate the changes in Idaho code and State Board of Education policy in an effort to develop a new campus policy in compliance with the recent legislation that permits some people to carry weapons on university and college campuses.

Matt Dorschel, executive director for UI Public Safety and Security, said members of the task force are in the information-gathering stage and he's taking input from students, staff, faculty, administrators and Moscow residents. UI, along with other institutions in the state, is also waiting to hear a final ruling on the Idaho State Board of Education's campus security policy change that was approved for a first reading earlier this month.

"We're getting a lot of questions," Dorschel said, adding the concerns vary and there aren't any answers yet.

The new law that exempts retired law enforcement officers and people who have enhanced concealed carry permits from regulations that prohibit firearms on college and university campuses was approved during this year's legislative session. The law, which bans even permit holders from bringing firearms into dorm rooms, residence halls or venues that seat more than 1,000 people, goes into effect July 1.

Dorschel said some of the questions he is receiving include whether or not a faculty member can ask their classes to identify who is carrying a concealed weapon, what will happen in areas like the child care center and the Kibbie Dome during football games and other events. Some people want to know if there are opportunities for exceptions, he said.

"Those are all questions that need to be answered," said Dorschel, who is the task force chairman.

"One of the things we really want to do is look at the best practices of other institutions with conceal carry permits on their campus," Dorschel said.

Officials at Idaho's other colleges and universities have voiced concerns that the new law will come with increased costs, but Dorschel said UI has not made that determination yet.

"If we identify practices or policies that come with a price tag, we will certainly try to communicate that with leadership early on," he said.

Kent Nelson, UI general counsel and a member of the task force, said his role throughout the process will be to provide advice to ensure that UI's policy is in compliance with Idaho code.

Nelson said while the law grants Idaho's institutions authority to regulate firearms on their property, it also takes some of the authority back by allowing the two types of permit holders to still carry on campuses with the exception of the listed areas.

"The legislation is very specific in that regard," Nelson said.

Dorschel said determining exactly how many of UI's facilities fall into the areas that weapons are still banned is another question the task force has to answer. As of now, he said it appears there are about three facilities that can hold more than 1,000 people.

Another aspect members of the task force will have to consider, Nelson said, is that UI is not just a Moscow campus. The university has locations in almost all of Idaho's counties, including experimental forests, agriculture and farm land, the Taylor Wilderness Research Station and the McCall Outdoor Science School.

"So we have to make sure that we consider all of that, and to that extent, that will be a good exercise for the university to consider all of that globally," Nelson said.

Dean of Students Bruce Pitman said he is particularly interested in ensuring UI is able to communicate with parents and prospective students accurately about the university's policies and ongoing commitment to maintaining a safe campus. He also wants to be able to communicate to students, faculty and staff what the expectations are of them once officials understand the full implications of the law.

For now, he said, there are a lot of "what if" questions.

"We are being very careful right now to make sure we know what the state board's expectation is before we start answering those questions," said Pitman, who is also a member of the task force.

Another area Pitman said he wants to understand as the vice provost for Student Affairs is how the law affects places like the Children's Center, Student Health Services and the Counseling and Testing Center.

"We each have our own ways of considering the implications of this law," Pitman said of the task force members, "and I hope we can bring these perspectives to the task force so in the end we can do a good, thorough job for the institution."

Rudd may be contacted at erudd@lmtribune.com or (208) 791-8465. Follow her on Twitter @elizabeth_rudd.