

Greetings GWU Board and Community,

May 2, 2023

We hope you are well.

As GWU faculty, we are committed to the dignity and the safety of all persons, especially our students. We trust the Board of Trustees shares this commitment.

The abruptness of the announcement that the GW Board of Trustees was implementing a plan for the GW Police Department to carry handguns raises concerns about the process and the lack of community feedback and discussion before the “decision” was made to create a plan of implementation.<sup>1</sup> The April 13 announcement presents the decision as final, then purports to invite “feedback” concerning an “implementation plan” that will be considered by the Board “later this spring,” leaving very little time for community input and leaving us doubtful that there is real interest in considering our views. This is not consistent with a collegial atmosphere and the value of shared governance,<sup>2</sup> and makes community members feel as if the University leadership and the Board of Trustees lack respect for faculty and student views or judgments. This decision is also dubious during the short remaining term of an interim President who is about to leave, and given the lack of transparency about the financial costs.

While we appreciate the notion of “reimagining public safety,” we find the recent decision a disappointing example of a *narrowing* of the imagination. We also find it inconsistent with the dignity of all persons and more likely to reduce safety rather than enhance it.

This policy is a narrowing of the imagination because it simply repeats the predominant pattern of relying on more violent methods in our policing and culture. We have seen this story over and over in our society. We have seen how armed police have continuously harmed and killed unarmed civilians, especially Black and other persons of color. Recent examples on campus include a University of Cincinnati officer who shot Samuel DuBose, an African-American student at the university, in an off-campus traffic stop. A Portland State University police officer shot and killed a Black father of three named Jason Washington, who was trying to break up a bar fight off campus.<sup>3</sup>

If we seek to broaden the imagination on public safety, have we trained the GWU community as a whole in how to illuminate the dignity of all people (especially in conflict situations), how to practice deep empathy, how to use nonviolent communication, how to de-escalate through active bystander intervention skills and nonviolent self-defense training, as well as the numerous

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.gwhatchet.com/2023/04/17/faculty-senators-voice-frustration-with-boards-decision-to-arm-gwpd-officers/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://bpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.gwu.edu/dist/0/196/files/2022/04/22-13-final-adopted-1.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Education/2020/0702/If-police-on-campus-have-guns-is-college-more-safe>; Also see, <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2023/4/4/lev-swatting-attack/>.

examples of unarmed persons protecting others, ensuring safety, and de-escalating those with weapons?<sup>4</sup>

The President claims that “Most comparable universities nationally and within the Washington metropolitan area are armed.” Yet, Georgetown University, American University, Trinity University, and Gallaudet University, which are all in DC, have only unarmed campus police.

The vast majority of instances in which GWPD is called to action are to resolve conflicts and pacify intoxicated students. By GWPD's own reports, they detained only 12 people on campus in 2022, none of whom were carrying weapons or contraband. The presence of guns on campus will primarily put students at risk of gun violence, and thus, reduce safety. We also know that some community members are currently more comfortable calling UPD precisely *because* they are unarmed.

The GWU announcement does not adequately reflect consideration of what it means to increase encounters with police who have guns in our university community. It is bound to change the feel of our campus. This is not the student experience we should be striving for at this university. We also know that the presence of guns makes it more likely that someone will act violently. A recent meta-analysis of studies on the “weapons effect” concluded that armed persons are more likely to believe the other person is armed, and moreover revealed that “the mere presence of weapons increased aggressive thoughts, hostile appraisals, and aggression.”<sup>5</sup>

A 2021 JAMA Network study of mass school shootings from 1980 to 2019 found "no association between having an armed officer and deterrence of violence," and the rate of deaths was 2-3x's higher with an armed officer present.<sup>6</sup> A 2021 study by the University at Albany and RAND found similar results.<sup>7</sup>

We *urge* that GW reverse its decision to arm GWPD, and instead broaden our imagination about public safety in accord with the dignity of all persons.

Signed by:

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.americamagazine.org/content/all-things/transformation-gunpoint>,  
<https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/23/us/brandon-tsay-alhambra-monterey-park-shooting/index.html>,  
<https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/22/us/richard-fierro-colorado-springs-club-q-shooting/index.html>,  
<https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/22/us/waffle-house-shooting-hero-tennessee/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Witt, J. K., Parnes, J. E., & Tenhundfeld, N. L. (2020). Wielding a Gun Increases Judgments of Others As Holding Guns: a Randomized Controlled Trial. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 5(1), 58.  
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s41235-020-00260-3>.

<sup>6</sup> <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2776515>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.statesman.com/story/news/politics/politifact/2022/06/01/fact-check-do-armed-campus-police-prevent-school-shootings/9961676002/>

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