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RETHINKING CAMPUS SAFETY: BENTLEY UNIVERSITY'S STUDENT-CENTERED POLICING MODEL

By Francis G. Bourgeois, 33-Year Law Enforcement Veteran and Dr. J. Andrew Shepardson, Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students at Bentley University

“Thank you! You have changed my view of policing,” said Jay, a graduating senior. The same student, who, when he arrived four years earlier, was hesitant to talk to the police and admittedly avoided us and did not trust us. Now, on his last day on campus, his last stop was to come by the police station, shake hands, and thank us for his experience. When we share this story with higher education colleagues, we always hear, “that would never happen at my institution.” It surprises us, because it is actually rare to not have students thanking University Police.

When we ask why they can't expect a student to thank UP we hear, “Because it has always been that way.” This familiar refrain often accompanies resistance to change, and nowhere is this more evident than in traditional campus police structures. Historically, university police departments have reported to finance or administrative departments, positioning safety as a matter of logistics rather than student wellbeing. But Bentley University has chosen a different path - one that places public safety squarely within the heart of the student experience.

A Model Grounded in Student Affairs

At Bentley, the police department is housed within Student Affairs, offering an alternative in philosophy. Rather than managing risk from a distance, this model integrates law



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enforcement into the daily rhythms of student life. It encourages relationship-building, proactive engagement, and a policing style centered on compassion and context.

Bentley, like most campus departments, doesn't require specialty units for stolen vehicles, narcotics trafficking, or gang suppression. Instead, Bentley builds community-oriented teams such as the Community Engagement Unit, which focuses on presence, partnerships, and prevention. The return on investment? Exponential. Officers aren't just responders; they are contributors to the campus culture and are well known by name in their community.

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Structure matters to organizations. With a police department in the student affairs division, the focus is on mission, culture, and trust.

Mission

Of course, safety is paramount for any policing unit. Often the safety needs of all, not just students, are highlighted as a reason for not having campus law enforcement in Student Affairs.

But that is a limiting mission. The reality is that all campus law enforcement units do a great job creating safe environments. The focus at Bentley is ensuring student wellbeing. Even if crime statistics articulate that the campus is safe, that does not matter if a student (or any community member) does not feel safe. The 24-hour nature of a residential campus means that often it is a police officer that a student turns to when they need help. Being a part of Student Affairs means officers are focused on helping students on their educational journey. This focus is felt by students and reinforced by our student affairs colleagues when talking to students. The result is students have trust in the police department and seek us out when they need assistance.

Their focus is not determining whether a crime occurred but rather offering some guidance or a referral if necessary. This does not come at the expense of quality policing. Our department operates at the highest level of policing as one of only 15 higher education police departments accredited in Massachusetts.

Culture

Often, we hear that there is no way a police culture and a Student Affairs culture could mesh. And there is no doubt that the cultures are very different. But rather than a reason to keep them separated, it is a reason to bring them closer. We

focus on inclusive excellence at Bentley — not just when it is easy, but also when it is challenging.

We have not always had alignment and there have been conflicts, both personal and professional. But we have developed the tools within our culture to navigate these challenges and be stronger because of them. We don't blame the members of another division. Rather, we pull closer to our colleagues and ask them to help us understand. Our police officers are better at their work because they have learned and appreciated the culture of Student Affairs AND, our Student Affairs professionals are better at their work because they, too, have learned to value different perspectives.

Trust

What is most important is that we are there for students when they need us most, whether a safety crisis like an accident or crime on campus, or a personal crisis like a mental health situation or family tragedy. We are most effective when various departments work together to help the community have trust in each other. Trust does not just happen because we want it to. It takes time and dedication.

At Bentley, the Chief is part of the Student Affairs Leadership Team and is expected to build strong relationships with all departments. With leadership meetings at least once a week, there is plenty of time for collaboration. But there is also time for conflict, misunderstandings, and failed expectations. However, those are the best opportunities to build trust. Being in the same division means you need to resolve the conflict sooner rather than later because you are going to have to work together. You must be present, work through it honestly, and if done correctly, build a sense of trust that you can rely on during the most difficult situations.



This type of trust with the leaders of the organizations helps build stronger connections for the teams on the ground. Joint training sessions between University Police and residential life staff have proven to be a valuable platform for information sharing and mutual understanding. While both groups often respond to the same incidents, they naturally approach situations through different lenses - law enforcement prioritizes safety and legal protocols, while residential life focuses on student wellbeing and developmental context.

Once we began openly sharing our responsibilities and thought processes, we saw a significant reduction in friction caused by misunderstandings or assumptions. This shift fostered a deeper appreciation for each other's roles and clarified our collective responsibilities.

By training together and reviewing past calls, we've cultivated a shared language and approach. These sessions have sparked meaningful conversations, built trust, and ultimately led to better outcomes for our students, ensuring that every response is informed, compassionate, and aligned with the broader mission of student support.

Growth

College isn't just about academics, it's a time when students form their views on citizenship, justice, and community. Bentley's model allows students to experience policing in a way that rewrites negative narratives. When a graduating senior, once skeptical of law enforcement, walks into the department simply to say thank you - that's the kind of reward that can't be measured by metrics alone.

Bentley University's integrated, student-centered model of campus policing serves as a blueprint for institutions seeking transformational change. By placing officers at the nexus of student life, collaboration, and event planning, public safety becomes a trusted partner in the university's mission and growth in students' lives.

Biographies

Francis G. Bourgeois: is a 33-year law enforcement veteran with an M.B.A and several police leadership certificates. He served the Nashua N.H. Police Department for 20 years with assignments ranging from Detectives, Community Policing Unit, police prosecutor, S.W.A.T. and two years at the N.H. Attorney General's Office as an investigator. He also spent five years working in corrections in Massachusetts. Prior to joining Bentley University where he now serves as Chief of Police and Assistant V.P. of Student Affairs, Francis worked as the Associate Director of Residential Safety and Security at Northeastern University in Boston where he also served as Director of Housing. He holds a Management Degree from Suffolk University and an M.B.A from Rivier University. Francis is an accomplished law enforcement professional with a number of awards and recognitions.

Dr. J. Andrew Shepardson is the Vice President of Student Affairs and Dean of Students at Bentley University where he has served for over 30 years. Dr. Shepardson is a highly regarded student affairs practitioner with numerous appearances as a guest speaker on matters involving student affairs. Dr. Shepardson's foundational approach to student development outside of the classroom is what led the university police department to be assigned to the Student Affairs Division. In addition to his roles on campus, Andrew has taught undergraduate and graduate courses at Bentley, Northeastern and Suffolk universities. He has been named staff member of the year by Bentley students and received the university's Founder's Day award. Andrew holds a Ph.D. from the Lynch School of Education at Boston College, an M.Ed. in Student Development and Counseling from Northeastern University, and a B.A. in English from St. Michael's College in Vermont.

