



A Proactive Plan for Students

Like many faculty members across campus, **Christopher Malo** and **Brian Creech** send their students around the city for course work. How to do that during the crime surge has been a challenge. They spoke to people around campus and built strategies, which they present here.

It wasn't that long ago you could tell a bad reporter because they always answered the phone at their desk, meaning they were always at their desk. They weren't out reporting, talking to people, developing relationships, finding story ideas, gaining understanding and familiarity with the folks on whom they reported. In that spirit—and in preparation for a career in journalism—the journalism department's capstone program, Philadelphia Neighborhoods (PN), has embraced that ethos.

Since 2008, PN students have been engaging with the people living in Philadelphia who are traditionally ignored by most news organizations unless something sensational or violent occurs. Our students report both on and in underserved and under-resourced communities across the city. They spend time walking the streets in Philadelphia neighborhoods, attending community meetings, talking to small business owners, attending street festivals, and generally getting to know the people who live in Philadelphia.

Recently, as crime has increased in the city and safety has become a more pressing concern for everyone, we have had to revisit how we do this.

In the Field

Getting students out of the classrooms and into the neighborhoods has become more challenging in recent years. The COVID-19 pivot forced us to reconsider face-to-face reporting. We developed tools to work around quarantines, but still connect to people, knowing at the time that some COVID practices would be shed, others adopted, and even more adapted.

As fall 2021 began, many instructors and students alike hoped to settle into some new sense of normalcy. We were all excited about returning to in-person classes, especially for those that required students to learn from doing. But from the first assignments of the semester, our students and instructors sensed a shift when visiting neighborhoods. The city changed during the pandemic. Household and city resources are

strained, and there's more desperation on the streets. There are also fewer eyes outside to see what is going on, less foot and vehicle traffic along blocks that were once vibrant and busy. And, unfortunately, the city has seen more crimes of opportunity.

We quickly realized that common sense and cultural sensitivities around safety could not be taken for granted. As a department that relies on experiential learning and sending students off-campus as core to our pedagogy, we needed to revisit the topic of safety from both administrative and instructional perspectives.

To adequately respond to the changing conditions our students were facing in a changing city, we realized we needed to define what "safety" meant in this context. Prioritizing physical safety while reporting in the field was foundational to our class model. But, in other contexts, mitigating emotional and mental harm are equally important to plan for. At the same time, as a diverse faculty with diverse students on a diverse campus in a diverse city, we quickly learned that different student populations faced different kinds of vulnerabilities.

Revisiting practices

There's a tension between the responsibilities

Continued on page 12



Continued from page 11

of a reporter and our obligation as educators. For instance, when we ask students to produce journalism as working professionals, that puts a tacit pressure on students that may push them to take unnecessary risks that compromise their personal safety. Real or perceived pressures that we have all encouraged include deadline pressure, financial penalties for stolen equipment (we suggest students get renters insurance), and telling students, “Be close to the action.”

Our goal, though, was not to keep students on campus; that would be a disservice to their development as journalists, and also as students and residents of Philadelphia. Safety, then, is also an issue of cultural sensitivity and common sense. Essentially, we needed to revisit how we are teaching students to carry themselves while reporting around the city and engaging with the people who live here.

We reached out to various people within the Temple community to seek counsel and see what others were doing, seeing, and hearing in order to develop a set of best practices. At the same time, a group of journalism department faculty began to meet periodically to brainstorm and figure out how to implement best practices. Ideas included safety training from Campus Safety Services and cultural sensitivity training from IDEAL early on in our core classes, with key lessons reinforced throughout the journalism program—especially in any class that sends students out to report.

In the case of an incident, we realized we needed an emergency phone system/tree/chain with the department office, chair, assistant chair, professor and any group partner/classmate. We also learned we needed to communicate and reiterate some best habits to students, such as communicating the timing of their reporting trips to classmates and/or instructors so that everyone knows when students are reporting. This could be as simple as email notifications, just to keep track, but instructors and students also needed to develop a habit of checking-in after a reporting trip as well.

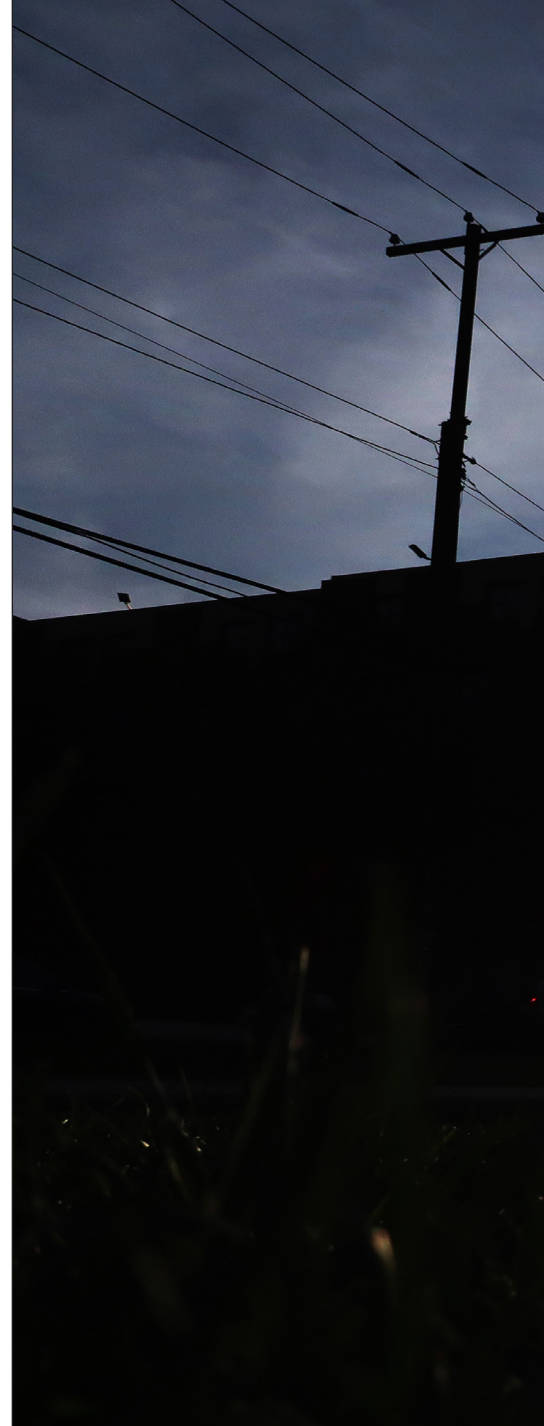
We then looked toward other universities to

see what similar safety resources or protocols are available online. We quickly learned that Temple’s journalism program is unique among its peers, in that our program features a production capstone that regularly expects students to report from underserved and under-resourced neighborhoods in an urban setting. In our research, it seemed that a significant number of journalism programs directed students toward external resources in the event of an emergency, and do not require formalized training or a response plan for either instructors or students.

Responses

While the faculty researched and developed an organized response to student safety, the fact that students continued to report in neighborhoods around Philadelphia meant we had to plan and act at the same time. We began distributing department chair David Mindich’s phone number to students and faculty in the case of an incident; we also provided instructors with phone numbers for Klein College’s senior vice dean, vice dean of student success and director of finance; Prof. Brian Creech performed an initial, but not final, update to our safety policies; our manager of multimedia Neil Ortiz produced a video (covering planning and risk assessment, awareness of own and community identities, setting up a contact person, photo, reporting, situational awareness, respect for subjects, video and audio acquisition, training); Profs. Sarah Landwehr, Linn Washington, and Chris Malo created instructional resources with an accompanying slide deck available for instructors to use to talk about safety issues in their classes and for students to keep as a semester-long reference. Finally, we redesigned our assignments, creating a specific place in the reporting process for students and instructors to discuss students’ safety plans before they go into the field to report.

In the classroom, we needed to clearly communicate to students that their safety was the priority, not any equipment or valuables. Not the story. Not the grade on the assignment. We have



found this to be both clarifying and reassuring to students when articulating priorities, and created opportunities to reiterate to them that if they are ever uncomfortable with an assignment, to discuss it with an instructor and plan an alternative.

Takeaways

At the core of our plan, we developed a list of common sense safety pips, some basic precautions for students to take when navigating the city:

Planning

- Meet with people in public, during business hours
- Know ways in and out of neighborhoods, sticking to highly trafficked routes



- Know who you are going to talk to, where you will be going, and what you will focus on

Buddy system

- Don't carry items that make you a target, hand over equipment if an assailant demands it
- Treat people with deference and respect
- Be aware, show awareness

Buddy system

- Go out with a friend
- Tell someone where you are going and when you will return
- Set up check-in times with a friend

While these protocols do not have any specific language around this topic yet, it is important for any department focused on safety to realize certain student populations may be more

vulnerable, in general and when reporting or interacting with certain communities. Because of that, there is a need to offer advice, guidelines, and resources that take specific students' identities into account while also allowing them to be empowered in the classroom.

While the work of the last year has been a good start, developing more resources and continuing to monitor both safety in Philadelphia and how students are moving through the city are, and will continue to be, of paramount concern. We have also had to learn how to balance practical concerns with idealism around safety. For instance, we know many of our students may be cautious about involving the police, especially if an encounter may lead to escalation. Because of our focus on preserving students' bodily safety, we still suggest they call 9-1-1 and contact police, fire, or EMS first in the event of an emergency.

More than developing policies and processes, though, we developed a departmental and pedagogical culture where thinking practically about student safety becomes part of preparing for a new semester, every semester.

All of which means our faculty are on the lookout for ways to think about safety without letting it deride our focus on training students to produce quality journalism. We would be open to hearing how any other school, department, or class addresses the topic as we continue to refine best practices.



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