

George Mason University

**Presidential Task Force on University Police and
University Community Relations**

Final Report, July 11, 2011

Executive Summary

In March 2011, George Mason University President Alan Merten created the Presidential Task Force on University Police and University Community Relations to seek input from members of the Mason community on their experiences and interactions with the Mason police department. The goal of the Task Force was to create a set of recommendations to enhance the campus environment at Mason by ensuring the university has a competent, respectful, and just police force. (*See Appendix A for related information.*)

The Task Force began its work in earnest in spring 2011 and continued through early summer 2011. Over that time, it held two public hearings, met separately with resident advisors (RAs) and resident directors (RDs), and had members of the Mason community submit their comments via e-mail.

After careful review of the input it received, the Task Force created a set of 24 recommendations that are presented in this report. These recommendations fall under five main themes:

- Change the Role and Function of the University Police to Embody the Values of George Mason University
- University Police Must Treat All Members of the University Community and Visitors Fairly and Respectfully
- Increase Accountability of the University Police to the Campus Community
- Create a Mutual Partnership between the University Police and Resident Advisors and Resident Directors
- Reinforce the Critical Importance of Strong Leadership and Supervision in Implementing Reforms and Changing Police Culture

In light of the number of respondents who voiced dissatisfaction with the University Police, it is the Task Force's belief that a top-to-bottom change of culture is required within Mason's police department. The Task Force strongly believes that implementation of these recommendations will lead to a police force that is a partner with the rest of the Mason community and one that is fair, just, and respectful of those it is trusted with serving and protecting.

Task Force Members

Co-chair: Rose Pascarell, Associate Vice President, University Life

Co-chair: Peter Pober, Chair, Faculty Senate; Professor, Communication

D'Leon Barnett, 2010-11 President, Student Government

John Blacksten, Associate Vice President, University Relations

Joey Carls, Chair, Staff Senate

Pat Donini, Associate Vice President, Human Resources

Mark Hopson, Co-chair, Campus Climate Committee; Assistant Professor, Communication

Corey Jackson, Assistant to the President, Office of Equity and Diversity Services

Mike Lynch, Chief, University Police

Linda Schwartzstein, Vice Provost, Academic Affairs/VP, Enrollment Services, Provost Office

James Willis, Assistant Professor, Criminology, Law and Society

Recommendations

The following 24 recommendations are based on feedback the Task Force received from 17 individuals at two public hearings, 11 RAs, nine RDs, and more than a hundred e-mailed comments. Each identified theme is followed with an explanatory statement, a brief summary of the evidence, and a list of recommendations for implementation.

I. Change the Role and Function of the University Police to Embody the Values of George Mason University

While maintaining order and improving public safety are important goals, the actions and attitudes of the University Police should go beyond these to incorporate the values of respect, diversity, and individuality, which are integral to George Mason University’s mission as an institution of higher learning.

The Issue

A common theme that emerged from respondents’ comments was the appropriate role of the University Police on a university campus that supports diversity, individuality, and respect for others. Consistent with the goals of higher learning, universities traditionally embrace a wide range of behaviors and attitudes. Moreover, dialogue is valued over unquestioning obedience and the use of force to ensure compliance.¹ Official crime data on Campus Safety and Security (2007–09) indicate very few occurrences of serious crime on the Mason campus.² This high level of public safety on campus suggests that there is little reason for the University Police to assume a crime fighter stance that distances officers from the public they serve, favors strict adherence to the law, and embraces the traditional police power to issue citations and make arrests.

Many respondents characterized the University Police as assuming such a role—that they were aloof, quick to assert their formal authority, and overly punitive—a role that was inappropriate for a campus environment. Some members of the campus community were sufficiently distrustful of the University Police that they were reluctant to share their experiences publicly. Comments that the Task Force did hear included:

- “The largest problem with the police force I have witnessed is their overly aggressive nature toward students when they feel an offense has occurred. I have worked across many campuses up and down the East Coast and have never seen or heard about the enforcement of the law like I do at Mason.”
- “So, it seems like to me arrest of students should be the very last resort, not something that’s done casually and upfront, and amends aren’t perhaps fully possible to be made if this happens. So, I hope this issue is addressed.”
- “Speaking of legal action, candidly, I think what we need here is not a police force, but we need a security force, an unarmed security force, whose main objective is to facilitate everything, keep peace, but be nice and recognize that this is a culture of a university and things happen here that don’t happen on

the outside, and you know, instead of elevating and escalating things, the idea is to, you know, make everybody or help everybody to just get along, be nice to each other to some extent, and to understand there's going to be disagreements among students and faculty and so on and so forth."

- "I'm particularly concerned about political rights, rights of free speech on campus, and other constitutional rights. I think the college campus has a special responsibility to respect those and honor those."
- "Police need a greater understanding of the situations and people they will encounter on a college campus."
- "... I went to court twice actually and appealed it and that's when I got my license over here. The policeman was there like 41 minutes early. I don't know. It just felt like he was there to get me."

Recommendations for Improvement

1. Under the leadership of the senior vice president, develop a new mission statement for University Police with input from Mason administrators, faculty, students, and staff. This mission must incorporate best practices and be consistent with humanistic and liberal values that define living and working on a university campus.
2. In support of the new mission, implement regular and comprehensive training that includes community policing, diversity, and multiculturalism. Important elements of community policing include broadening the University Police role beyond crime control to provide services to the public (e.g., giving crime prevention advice, doing building checks, providing directions).
3. Work in close partnership with community members to reduce problems and concerns that the community (not just the University Police) identifies as important. Community policing must be an organizational strategy, not merely an exercise in public relations. Under community policing, mechanisms are put in place that give community members opportunities to convey problems and concerns directly to the police and participate meaningfully in their resolution. To this end, the University Police should organize regular and frequent community meetings and increase opportunities for positive contact between the University Police and the community.
4. Implement structures and activities that support this mission, to include recruitment, supervision, and evaluation of officers.
5. Establish mutual understanding between the University Police and the community and create opportunities for positive interaction. Some suggestions are:

- a. Officer participation in Mason Move-In.
- b. Increased foot patrols, particularly late at night when several female students commented that they felt unsafe walking on campus.
- c. Coordinated outreach and active engagement with multicultural, identity-focused, and international student organizations in consultation with the units and individuals who advise those groups.
- d. Coordinated outreach and active engagement with student government, faculty senate, and staff senate.

II. Treat All Members of the University Community and Visitors Fairly and Respectfully

Not everyone will get the outcome they desire, but the University Police must make every effort to treat each member of the campus community fairly and respectfully in ways that are considered procedurally just.

The Issue

A significant body of research suggests that public confidence in and satisfaction with the police depends less on their abilities as crime fighters and more about the process of how community members are treated in their encounters with the police. It is especially important to people that they feel they are treated with fairness and respect.³ Minorities are particularly sensitive to treatment by the police, more likely to report that they are treated poorly or unfairly, and less satisfied with how they are treated.³ Notably, poor treatment has a very powerful negative effect on people's satisfaction with the police. For visitors, especially, the actions of University Police should convey the values and mission of the university because these actions often provide visitors with their first experience of the campus community.

Many of the negative comments the Task Force heard centered on perceptions of the University Police as dismissive, uncaring, biased or inconsistent, untrustworthy, unsupportive, and unresponsive to community members' concerns. The Task Force recognizes that it was only hearing one side of each encounter and that people often feel aggrieved when they encounter the police, especially when the encounter is involuntary. Furthermore, the Task Force heard many positive comments about the professionalism of the University Police (particularly in the e-mailed responses); however, these tended to be in the context of calls where community members were in the role of consumers and requesting service or assistance (e.g., faculty or staff locked out of buildings or cars).

The Task Force was struck by how many respondents, especially those respondents providing general impressions of the University Police and those describing actual encounters, expressed dissatisfaction with how they were treated. The Task Force's impression was that this issue was particularly of concern to people of color and people of diverse sexual orientations. People often sense when police officers are being disrespectful or abusing their authority even though they are

unclear about whether or not they behaved illegally, or whether their behavior warrants a warning, ticket, or arrest.⁴

The following comments are illustrative of the concerns the Task Force heard:

- “Without any explanation or polite approach, the officer very impertinently asked for Mr. Evangelista’s license. Maria’s father then asked the officer politely the reason for her request. She rudely replied that they had received a complaint that someone was attempting to get into the student dorms.”
- “Discovering the unfair handling of Abdi’s situation and more stories of the [Mason] police’s reoccurring patterns of cultural discrimination and poor quality of professionalism makes me feel uneasy about the school’s police force. I myself have Filipino lineage, but I was born and raised in the United States....To know this local issue exists makes it hard for me; discrimination and even poor professionalism by the police is an occurring [*sic*] problem. It makes me uneasy being ‘protected’ by people who have been reported to use unfair treatment to people of an ethnicity other than Caucasian.”
- “He then proceeded to follow me through three more stop signs then two traffic lights before pulling me over. Although he wasn’t blatantly disrespectful, he was very condescending when asking me if she [*sic*] knew why he was pulling me over and through his explanation to me...I am a Muslim woman and wear a *hijab*. I’m not one to play the religion card, but I just wonder what his motivation was that night.”
- “My pregnant wife and I came to attend a basketball game a few years ago (2007). I was driving on Patriot Circle and was waiting until the vehicles in my direction were allowed to turn since traffic was being handled by the [Mason] police. I tried to use the moment as an opportunity to ask an officer if it would be alright to drop my wife off at the Patriot Center (she was 7½ months pregnant at the time) since the vehicles were stopped at that moment and I happened to be next to an officer. He ignored me the first time I asked. The second time I asked, he completely ignored my question and told me to move my vehicle. When I questioned him again, thinking that he might not have heard me, he asked for my license and threatened to arrest me for not following the orders of a police officer and gave me “one last chance to move.” I had no choice but to move my car and have my wife walk from a distant parking lot to the Patriot Center in the rain. Normally this is no concern, we’ve done it many times, but I really did not think it would have been an issue to drop her off and go park the vehicle. I thought it was out of line for the officer to act the way he did and there was no reason to threaten me just because he didn’t want to answer my question. Needless to say, it did put a slight damper on our

evening out and we also lost some respect for the George Mason police department as a whole for allowing their officers to behave in such a way. The powers invested in them are to protect and serve, not to abuse and inconvenience.”

Recommendations for Improvement

6. Provide training in procedural justice. All officers should be trained in the elements of procedural justice. Research suggests that when people feel the police are using their authority fairly and appropriately, they are more likely to view the police as legitimate. If they see the police as legitimate, they are more likely to obey laws, comply with a police officer’s requests, assist the police by providing information that helps with the identification, arrest, and conviction of offenders, and participate in crime prevention programs.

Briefly, the elements of procedural justice are:⁵

- a. Participation—people are more satisfied with procedures that allow them to give input before a decision is made about how to handle a problem.
 - b. Neutrality—people look for evenhandedness and objectivity or police putting aside their personal views when making decisions.
 - c. Dignity and respect—people value being treated politely and having their rights acknowledged
 - d. Motives—people are more likely to see procedures as fair when they trust the motives of decision makers. Police can encourage people to view them as trustworthy by explaining their decisions or making them transparent.
7. Include the principles of procedural justice in formal policies and guidelines, public relations materials, information to students, and on the University Police website.

III. Increase Accountability of the University Police to the Campus Community

In a democratic society, the police are ultimately accountable to the public they serve. The Task Force recommends that new mechanisms be put in place for campus members to track information about their encounters with University Police officers, express concerns about their treatment by the University Police, and provide external oversight of University Police operations.

The Issue

Accountability is a key element of police reform and can be thought of occurring within police departments and through external agencies. Rules and training are two popular mechanisms of promoting internal accountability, while another is through recordkeeping. Some respondents expressed concern that it was not always easy to get information on their particular case from the University Police, while others were unhappy that the only means of lodging a complaint was through the University Police's own formal complaints process. In terms of external oversight of University Police operations, the Task Force heard suggestions for the creation of an independent oversight committee.

The basis for the recommendation lies in the following comments:

- “The third is there’s no accountability. There needs to be an independent body where people can relate their complaints and that body would have sanctions and would listen to them quickly and there would be a sense that your complaints are heard.”
- “Give students a permanent medium to express problems on campus or with police. This Task Force is an amazing start but there must be a permanent place for students to voice their concerns and take police out of our dorms or at least approach this technique differently.”
- “So I think that a task force, independent of the police, would be a good idea, not just for this one time. You know, because if this situation is resolved this one time, what if something happens again next year? Then you all would have to spend all the resources trying to come up with the Task Force again and we’re going to be right back in here again, discussing the same thing.”
- “Longer term, we need a task force or some sort of system to regularly catalog and review complaints raised against the police. This operation must be outside and completely independent of the police organization itself.”

Recommendations for Improvement

8. Create a receipt system (much like police provide after a traffic stop). After all significant contacts with community members, University Police should provide them with a receipt that includes relevant information of the encounter, including the officer's name, badge number, community member's name, date and time of the encounter, reasons for the encounter, and the actions the University Police officer took. The receipt should also include a number that the department and the community member could use to track any developments, and contact information that community members could use if they had any follow-up concerns or questions. Professor Stephen Mastrofski, an internationally recognized police scholar at Mason, has advocated such a system for local law enforcement in general: “The receipt makes the officer readily accountable to the citizen, since the citizen may dispute immediately any information that seems incorrect. It also provides the department with the means to track such contacts.”⁶

9. Create an independent committee to monitor the University Police. The Task Force has not resolved the precise form and duties of the University Police Oversight Committee (UPOC), but it does have some suggestions. The responsibilities of the UPOC would include reviewing University Police actions and receipts, and receiving, investigating, and disposing of community member complaints against the University Police. The development of the UPOC should coincide with the development of a clear and transparent complaint process. An important part of this process should be to keep both the officer and community member informed of the complaint's progress and a clear explanation of its disposition. These complaints should be part of the department's annual performance evaluation of all sworn officers. The UPOC's membership should be diverse, including faculty, staff, and students, and represent all campuses.
10. Develop a survey, distributed annually to the Mason community, which measures perceptions of effectiveness, honesty, fairness, concern for well-being, importance in maintaining safety, courtesy, performance, knowledge, and university misconduct.
11. Create a commission—similar to this presidential Task Force—that would meet annually to assess the performance of the University Police, identify problems, and suggest any necessary reforms. The responsibilities of this Task Force would include soliciting comments from the UPOC, the general university community, and members of the police force on the University Police's performance.
12. Review University Police policies and guidelines, website, and all informational materials to make transparent mission, values, and up-to-date current practice.

IV. Create a Mutual Partnership between the University Police and Resident Advisors and Resident Directors

As the proportion of students residing on campus continues to increase, it is likely that the number of problems requiring a University Police response will also rise. Because more than 5,000 students are living on campus, it is inevitable that some of their behavior will come to the attention of the University Police. Underage drinking and illicit drug use can occur in any neighborhood, and young adults may experience highly personal and emotional issues (such as mental health and relationship difficulties) that may result in a University Police response. Given the nature of these problems, the Task Force recommends a close working partnership between the University Police and RAs and RDs that works to the mutual benefit of both parties and the students they serve.

The Issue

RAs and RDs play an important role in helping students adjust to living away from home and coping with the stresses of campus life (e.g., balancing work with classes, confronting new lifestyles and diverse ideas, dealing with roommates and new relationships). In fact, many of the

RDs have postgraduate degrees in student affairs or related fields, and are professional staff. All of those who spoke to the Task Force were positive about the University Police, but even those who praised the University Police expressed concerns. Many of these fell under recommendation 2 above, but several were unique to their particular role and responsibilities. RAs and RDs act as mentors, student advocates, and policy enforcers, and their functions include safety and security in residence halls, counseling, crisis intervention, administrative processes, and judicial matters. The RAs and RDs said that their role in relation to the University Police was not always clear, communication between the two could be improved, and there might be greater consistency in how students were treated by the University Police for similar offenses.

At the meetings with RAs and RDs, the following comments spoke to these concerns:

- “At least I, as an RA, often feel like calling the police for an incident is a toss-up. The responding officer could be as tough as nails, unyielding, and have an attitude more suited for a patrol of south central LA, than a conflict in Virginia. The officer could be far too laid back and not issue citations or warnings, where appropriate, or the officer could be a balance of these two of good judgment of when to issue citations and arrests and when not to.”
- “It seems like for RAs, we should be training alongside the police at some point. I know we have Safety Day. I mean, we do get to interact with them a little bit, but we, as John and others have mentioned, we do have to call them and we need some transparency on what their role is and them understanding our role also, would probably help just to make sure the procedure is uniform with every incident. And that seems to be an issue here.”
- “One thing I would like to see, though, is at the beginning of the year being introduced to the police force so they know who I am [an RD] and they know that I’m a professional staff member. So, whenever I do respond to a situation, they know who I am and they can readily see how we all are and recognize that we are there to help.”
- “But sometimes I do have a tough time, like Clair said, getting the information that I need [from the police]. I’ll ask for a student’s name, and they’ll give me like a first name. I can’t look the student up based off of a first name. A last name would be amazing because I can go through and find that pretty quickly, but a first name is tough.”

Recommendations for Improvement

13. Consider the permanent assignment of University Police officers to specific on-campus resident neighborhoods so they get to know the RAs, RDs, and students who live there. Several students praised the work of the housing liaison officer, who was accessible, got to know the students, and was a very useful resource for information and advice.

14. Training sessions should be held annually and throughout the year as necessary between University Police and RAs and RDs to clarify roles, responsibilities, and procedures, particularly when it comes to university alcohol, drug, eviction, and mental health policies. These venues would be an opportunity to discuss any emerging problems and concerns.
15. Provide RAs and RDs with an official ID (including name and headshot) that can be hung around their necks and helps identify them immediately as housing staff when University Police are responding to a call.
16. Improve communication between the RA or RD on duty and the responding officers so that both parties know the status of a case as it progresses. Officers should solicit input from the RAs and RDs, clearly explain decisions, and incorporate lessons learned from the process.
17. RAs and RDs must consistently be treated with respect as paraprofessional and professional members of staff and the Mason community.

V. Reinforce the Critical Importance of Strong Leadership and Supervision in Implementing Reforms and Changing Police Culture

The Issue

Additional and thoughtful discussion by the Task Force focused on the critical importance of strong and consistent leadership and supervision within the University Police. To be successful, any shift in the structures, practices, and culture of the police organization must be wholly embraced by top police leadership.

The Basis

Given the breadth and depth of these reforms and the need for an immediate effect, several Task Force members expressed concern about the capacity of the current top police leadership to implement these recommendations. What was clear to all Task Force members is that the chief must play an instrumental role in the change process and must be a highly visible representative of these reforms, including their purposes and their desired consequences.

Recommendations for Improvement

18. Top police leadership must play a key role in publicizing the new mission to members within the police organization and the campus community, demonstrating the organization's commitment to it. It is particularly important that the chief inspire officers to embrace these values because they embody the organization's core goals and because they represent what the organization values most.

19. The actions of top leadership must evoke the university's values of respect, diversity, and individuality, and embrace the philosophy of community policing. Top police leadership must regularly solicit input from those outside the organization on police performance. Top police leadership must actively seek out new and innovative practices.
20. Top police leadership must demonstrate commitment to the principles of procedural justice.
21. Top police leadership must ensure all members of the police organization understand the nature and significance of these recommendations. The recommendations must be incorporated into external and internal performance evaluations of the department and individual officers.
22. Top police leadership must commit to recruiting, hiring, and training officers who are skilled in the craft of policing on a college campus. This environment presents unique challenges and demands a significantly different style of police work than traditional enforcement models.
23. Top police leadership must work hard to acquire the resources necessary for accomplishing the organization's goals (e.g., training, equipment, overtime).
24. Top police leadership should seek advice from Mason faculty in the Department of Criminology, Law and Society, several of whom are police scholars.

Conclusion

Community members expressed relief and gratitude for the creation of the Task Force and hope for the implementation of its recommendations. A strong signal must be sent to the Mason community that there will be significant changes in the way University Police interact with the campus community. The Task Force recognizes that enacting these recommendations, as with any large-scale organizational change, will be challenging. Successful implementation will require a staunch commitment from the executive council. Senior university leadership must empower the UPOC to fulfill its responsibilities. It is the Task Force's hope that the entire university community will embrace these recommendations and will exact change.

Appendix A

The following is the official announcement of the creation of the Task Force as written and disseminated by President Alan Merten's office in March 2011.

In order to uphold our commitment to fostering a community where respect for all is the hallmark, President Alan Merten has formed a Presidential Task Force to seek input from members of the Mason community on their interactions and experiences with the University Police Department.

The task force will hold two open meetings on April 12 and April 20 during which any current Mason student, faculty, or staff will have an opportunity to schedule a time to make a brief statement. Written statements may also be submitted to the Task Force at the following e-mail address: taskforc@gmu.edu.

Following the completion of the community meetings, the Task Force will submit an interim status report to President Merten, and will determine if further community meetings are necessary. It is our goal that a final report with outcomes and recommendations will be submitted to the president by mid-June.

The Task Force will be cochaired by Peter Pober, chair of the Faculty Senate, and Rose Pascarell, associate vice president for University Life, and will be comprised of faculty, staff, and students from across the university.

In addition, the university has hired Tomlinson Strategies LLC, an external consulting firm specializing in institutional safety, security assessments and law enforcement issues, to review the police policies and procedures that led to the arrest on a felony charge of Mason student Abdirashid Dahir in March 2011. All charges against Dahir were dropped. At the appropriate time the findings of this review will be made public.

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