

An Uphill Fight for the Right To Carry Guns on Campus

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Gun-rights advocates have won victories in several states in recent months allowing gun owners to carry concealed weapons in public parks, taverns and their work places.

So it came as a surprise to Tennessee state Rep. Stacey Campfield that he couldn't persuade his colleagues to pass a law allowing students at public colleges to carry concealed firearms on campus. The bill died this spring in the Republican-controlled legislature—one of 34 straight defeats nationwide for people who believe a gun wouldn't be out of place in a college student's knapsack.

Raucous debates over the parameters of the Second Amendment have become a staple of the culture wars. But even on an issue as divisive as gun control, states may be nearing something resembling a national consensus: Guns don't belong in a college classroom.

In the two years since a Virginia Tech student shot and killed 32 students and professors, gun-rights advocates have failed to pass laws even in states strongly supportive of gun owners' rights, including Louisiana, Alabama, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Mississippi and Kentucky. In June, a bill died in the Texas legislature in the face of criticism from college administrators and student groups, who invoked the specter of students toting loaded weapons to booze-soaked campus parties.

Gun-control advocates tout what they label an unprecedented winning streak, noting that it comes at a time when even many Democrats are wary of alienating U.S. gun owners.

Proponents of the bills are pressing on, arguing that passing such laws could help prevent the next Virginia Tech-style massacre. Mr. Campfield said he intends to reintroduce his bill in the next Tennessee legislative session. His state, which had 6.21 million residents in 2008, has approved the sale of more than 2.6 million firearms and issued more than 231,000 handgun carry permits, according to state records. The bill is "coming back stronger next year," Mr. Campfield said.



The shooting at Virginia Tech, where students observed its April 15 anniversary, mobilized supporters and opponents of campus-carry laws.

Some gun-rights advocates predict Texas will eventually provide their first victory, saying the legislature had the votes to pass the bill but simply ran out of time. "If Texas were to pass it, we predict that it would catch on in other states," said Katie Kasprzak, director of public relations for Students for Concealed Carry on Campus.

Only Utah expressly allows students at public universities to carry guns to class. The state passed such a law in 2004, before the Virginia Tech killings. Several states leave the decision up to schools. But only two schools in those states—Blue Ridge Community College in Virginia and Colorado State University—allow students to carry guns to class.

The push for legislation began in the immediate aftermath of the Virginia Tech killings. Ken Stanton, an engineering student there, helped found the first local chapter of Students for Concealed Carry on Campus, arguing it would allow students to defend themselves and prevent massacres from taking place. Within a year of the shooting, bills to expand the firearms-carrying rights of college students had been introduced in more than a dozen states.

But if the Virginia Tech shootings helped mobilize supporters of guns on campus, it also helped mobilize opponents. And some of the most vocal have been either victims of the shootings or people who lost loved ones.

Colin Goddard, a 21-year-old junior at the time, was shot four times in a classroom where his teacher and 11 fellow students were killed. Not long afterward, Mr. Goddard began speaking out

against guns on campus, and he is now an intern at the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence in Washington.

Like other critics of these proposed bills, including many police departments, Mr. Goddard argues that a proliferation of firearms would simply add to the chaos during a shooting spree, making it impossible for police to distinguish between good guys and bad. He also says events unfolded at such a lightning pace during the shootings that even an armed student would have been powerless to prevent them.

"There were students dead in their chairs—it happened that quick," he said. "I was shot before I really even knew what was going on."

Another former Virginia Tech student, John Woods, whose girlfriend was killed in the shootings, helped lead the fight this spring against the bill in Texas, where he is now a graduate student at the University of Texas.

In some states, legislators with strong gun-rights voting records have found themselves opposing these bills. This spring, Louisiana state Rep. Hollis Downs was one of 86 members of the Louisiana House to vote against allowing students with concealed-weapons permits to bring their guns onto the state's public campuses. The bill was defeated 86-18.

"I thought that the last thing that law enforcement needed was the fraternity militia to charge the building [in a shooting] with all guns blazing," said Mr. Downs, a Republican whose district includes Louisiana Tech University.

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