

**1613 Bow Hill Road  
Christiansburg, Va 24073**

May 22, 2007

Colonel Gerald Massengill  
Chair, Independent Review Panel  
P.O. Box 12337  
Arlington, Va 22219-2337

Dear Chairman Massengill:

My name is Lynn Nystrom. I am a member of Virginia Tech's College of Engineering's Dean's Suite. Until April 16 my office was in 333 Norris Hall where I worked as the Director of News and External Relations for the College.

I am writing to you and the panel today because of the events of April 16, 2007. I was in Norris Hall that day.

I sat through the panel hearing on May 21 in Blacksburg, and had come willing to participate in the public discussion. But I spoke with Larry Hincker, the director of University Relations, during the luncheon recess, and he asked me to put my thoughts in a letter instead. I concurred. Larry offered to provide me with your address, and he did.

My concerns are outlined because I am hoping that my perceptions might help in police preparedness in a future situation. However, I must say upfront that I do not believe my concerns represent new ideas; I only think my personal experience reinforces some of the previous outcomes of studies following such a tragedy.

Approximately 15 people were in the Dean's Suite that morning. Sometime after 9:30 a.m. the Associate Dean asked our receptionist to lock the glass doors to our suite. Those of us in private offices eventually congregated in the general foyer area.

Sometime close to 9:50 a.m., a SWAT team member arrived at our door and he was let in. He ordered all of us to leave. We blindly followed his order. For no special reason, I and another colleague took the lead. We ran down the U-shaped stair well, descending from the third floor to the second floor. We rounded the stairwell out onto the hallway of the second floor, and stopped in our tracks. A huge chain was blocking our exit.

At that point, I looked left to see if a gun was pointed at us, and retreated back into the area of the door frame, not allowing any of my colleagues behind me to get through. Still standing in front of me in the open was the first person. Outside the doors were two county officers, telling us to come out – after they said, "Put your hands up."

We told them we could not exit — that the door was chained. The officers then attempted to break the heavy wooden door down with their bodies. That action was

futile. I turned around, and told the group to get back upstairs where the SWAT team member was. I felt like we were incredibly vulnerable. At this point, I was later told, the SWAT officer was at the top of the stairs, completely out of my line of vision, shouting for us to get out. We were standing in the hallway with no place to go.

One of my other colleagues behind me then suggested we try and exit through an auditorium off the basement level. So our group proceeded down another flight of stairs, to the first floor, and successfully entered Norris Auditorium. We then actually exited through a door that appears to be part of another building, Holden Hall, adjacent to Norris. Cho had not locked the auditorium door.

With this story in mind, I have several points based on my perception and limited knowledge of all of the details of that day:

1. The SWAT team member ordered us down the stairs unescorted, long before the deceased male suspected to be the gunman was found at 10:08 a.m. I believe I have this time correct from the May 21 hearing.
2. The police knew the doors to the building were chained, and I have since been told that this SWAT team member was one of the first to break in at 9:50 through a lab door the police shot open. The chains were still on the doors. How did the SWAT team member expect us to get out? He never said run to the first floor lab that is on the opposite end of our Dean's Suite.
3. Shouldn't first responders know about all of the entrances to a state building?
4. I was told by an Associate Dean that a student, Sara Matrangola who was outside the building when the shooting started, thought she would be safer inside Norris and her classmates pulled her in through a ground floor window. She was able to enter the building.

The five minutes that it took for the police to get in the building, when there were entrances through an auditorium and through windows that were not locked, were critical. Sending 15 people out of a protected location, unescorted by a SWAT team member, down a stairwell to a chained door, and not knowing if the killer was dead, could have greatly increased the casualty number.

I consider myself and my colleagues to be very fortunate.

I started this letter by saying I wanted to help. Again, I do not believe my suggestions are new; I believe they are lessons previously learned.

From what I have read, the events of September 11, 2001 and Columbine illustrated the great need for improved communications systems, especially between first responders who represent various agencies. I myself counted no less than six police forces at Norris that morning. I do not believe they were communicating well between the agencies, and I am not sure if they were communicating well within their individual agencies either. We need excellent communications systems between our response groups.

On May 21, the Virginia Tech student on the rescue squad noted better communications could have improved their actions that day. I suspect a good communications system between all of the different police forces would also have helped tremendously. So, this observation is not new, but remains valid. Did the SWAT team member believe that the County officers had opened the exit door; why didn't the county officers know the door was still chained? This was at least the full five minutes after the first team broke into the building plus another minute or two for the SWAT team member to get to our suite.

We also need for first responders to have plans to buildings. Ours is a state university. The plans should be available to police, rescue squads, etc. If as soon as they arrived, the police had entered the way we exited – through the auditorium – or entered through the window, as Sara had, maybe some outcomes would be different. If I read an account of a report correctly, I believe another one of the lessons learned from Columbine was the police should not wait to enter a building. Five minutes — when everyone outside the building was listening as the shooting continuing inside — was too long when there were ways to get in.

Thankfully, April 16 is an event that most first responders nationwide will never have to face. I have great admiration for these people who place their own lives in jeopardy. And I listened very attentively and appreciatively on May 21 to the accounts presented to the panel.

I want my letter, which only touches some of your panel's many concerns, to be used constructively. If my perceptions are correct and we continue to learn the same lessons, what have we learned? I sincerely hope your panel will make a difference.

Please feel free to contact me if there is a need. My email is [tansy@vt.edu](mailto:tansy@vt.edu) and my campus number is 540 231 4371. My home number is 540 382 7072.

Thank you.

Respectfully submitted,

Lynn Nystrom

Cc: Larry Hincker  
Lenwood McCoy ✓