

As Lawmakers Mull Campus Concealed-Carry Measure, Students Consider Possible Effects

Andy Field

April 29, 2019

The Missouri Senate is considering a bill that would allow people to carry concealed weapons at public universities. The House approved the measure on April 8.

HB 575 was initially meant to allow university faculty and staff to arm themselves as “campus protection officers.” But Rep. Jered Taylor, R-Nixa, added an amendment to require public universities to allow concealed carry on campus.

Taylor said he proposed the amendment to allow women to protect themselves from sexual assault.

“The audacity to tell me or to tell the women in this state that they cannot protect themselves in one of those situations is beyond me,” Taylor said in the House. St. Louis Public Radio could not reach him for further comment.

Taylor cited a 2012 Cato Institute report (which he misidentified as a Kansas report), saying that there was a 60 percent decrease in crimes at Colorado State University from 2004 — one year after the state passed similar concealed-carry legislation.

Sen. Brian Williams, D-University City, and Sen. Jill Schupp, D-Creve Coeur, told St. Louis Public Radio they plan to oppose the bill. Schupp said she thinks the bill won’t leave the Senate floor.

“I think there are enough of us that believe that this is a really wrongheaded move, that it will never get a final vote,” she said. Her concerns relate to suicide. She cited a 2018 report from the Missouri Institute of Mental Health that suicide was the second-leading cause of death in Missouri for people aged 15 to 34. According to the report, 57 percent of all suicides in the state involved firearms in 2016.

Safety On Campus

The University of Missouri-St. Louis would be the only university in metro St. Louis that would be affected if the concealed-carry measure becomes law.

UMSL representatives declined to comment on the pending legislation or how the campus addresses safety issues. The president of UMSL’s student government, Joey Dordoni, who sits on the Campus Safety Committee, said the group, led by the campus chief of police, has never discussed concealed carry as a deterrent to crime.

Instead, he said, the committee has recently discussed expanding the use of electronic locks for campus classrooms at certain hours of the night. Dordoni also said he is in favor of UMSL installing stairwell cameras.

“If the state wants to put their weight behind something to improve safety on campus, I think investing in better safety equipment, and investing in campus safety in general, would help the situation better,” he said.

Under the measure, private universities would not have to allow people to carry concealed weapons on campus. But Matthew Richards, a St. Louis University student and a member of the university’s College Republicans, said he supports allowing students to arm themselves on campus.

“I think there’s a lot of value in letting people decide to take safety into their own hands on a college campus,” he said.

He read a message he received from campus police this month about a St. Louis University student who reported that she was sexually assaulted in an on-campus residence hall. He read an email from February about a female student who was threatened with a gun and carjacked after leaving the university library. And in December, he said he received a campus alert about three students who were robbed at gunpoint.

“Whenever (students) are traveling on campus, or commuting around, or moving off-campus, is probably where (concealed-carry) will find its most utility,” Richards said.

The Sexual Assault Argument

Zoe Peterson, an associate professor at the University of Indiana, said she finds the proposed bill problematic. Peterson worked at UMSL for 11 years. During her time there, she formed the Sexual Assault Research and Education Program, which gathered research and consulted sexual-assault-prevention organizations.

She said Taylor’s argument about protection against sexual assault fails to acknowledge the nature of most sexual assault cases. Nine in 10 sexual assault survivors knew the person who sexually victimized them, according to the U.S. Department of Justice.

“Women are usually assaulted by men they know, such as classmates, acquaintances, friends and boyfriends. So these are men that they trust,” said Peterson. “They are probably not likely to be carrying their weapon when they are with these men, because they don’t see them as a threat.”

While arguing for the concealed-carry amendment, Taylor mentioned the widely cited 2015 Association of American Universities survey, which found that one in four women experience sexual assault in four years of college.

But Peterson said sexual assaults on women in college often occur off campus.

“They happen in apartments and houses surrounding the campus, in nearby bars, and even they happen between students when they go away together on spring break,” she said. “Having guns on campus doesn’t really address the places where many of the sexual assaults take place.”

McKenzie Schuessler, a junior at UMSL and vice president of the UMSL College Democrats, said she doesn't think allowing concealed-carry should be the approach taken to prevent campus sexual assault.

"That's almost like treating a symptom. It's not treating the actual root cause," she said. "The root cause of sexual assault is the predator sexually assaulting women. We shouldn't have to arm ourselves with guns out of the fear that someone is going to rape us, kidnap us, or sexually assault us."

UMSL student Alyssa Gill is vice president of the campus chapter of Turning Points USA, a conservative student organization. Speaking for herself, she said she supports the legislation and plans to purchase a firearm in the future to protect herself.

"A gun-free zone is vulnerable, because only law-abiding citizens follow (the rules)," said Gill. "There's a very good saying: 'Laws: Good men don't need them; bad men don't follow them.'"