

The Problem of Boko Haram and The Safety of University Students in Northern Nigeria

Dare Ojo Omonijo, Covenant University, Nigeria, oluwadare.omonijo@covenantuniversity.edu.ng
Dorsey Spencer Jr., Florida State University, USA, dspencer2@fsu.edu

As higher education is becoming increasingly global, it is important to understand the experiences and challenges faced by higher education professionals in an international context. A major issue facing the area of international student affairs and services is how to ensure the safety of students and professionals in regions of political/social conflict or unrest. In northern Nigeria, student affairs professionals are challenged with keeping their students and themselves safe from the terrorist group, popularly known as Boko Haram. This issue affects private, state, and federal universities in the region. The institutions have had to evolve with the situation and develop policies and practices to protect their campuses and decrease vulnerability to potential attacks.

Boko Haram is a Nigerian militant extremist group based out of northern Nigeria. According to Andrew Walker (2012), it is “an Islamic sect that believes politics in northern Nigeria has been seized by a group of corrupt, false Muslims. It wants to wage a war against them, and the Federal Republic of Nigeria generally, to create a “pure” Islamic state ruled by sharia law” (p. 1). Boko Haram, the group’s nickname, translates to western education (boko) is forbidden (haram; Okpaga, Chijioke, & Eme, 2012). From July 27, 2009 to February 17, 2012, these terrorists were responsible for at least 53 attacks in thirteen 13 states (Okpaga, et al., 2012). Others estimate that in 2011 alone, the sect killed at least 550 people in 112 independent attacks (Pham, 2012). In April 2014 members of Boko Haram kidnapped over 250 school-aged girls from Chibok, Borno State (Peters, 2014; Zenn, 2014). Universities in northern Nigeria are not immune to these attacks. Boko Haram killed dozens of students in a residence hall at the College of Agriculture in Gujba, Yobe State in September 2013 (“Students massacred in Nigeria attack,” 2013). In September 2015, Boko Haram bombed an internally displaced persons camp in Yola, Adamawa State killing several people and injuring student volunteers from a local university (“Deadly blast at Nigerian camp,” 2015).

With an insurgency group such as Boko Haram, higher education professionals in the northern Nigeria region have had to review their policies, procedures, structures, and practices. How will they ensure the safety of their campuses? How will the universities ensure their students feel safe? How will the universities ensure parents and guardians that their students are safe on campus and in the surrounding community? How can they keep everyone well informed? How will the university respond if there is an attack on campus? Can they keep students safe while off campus? Should certain liberties of the students be restricted as a condition of enrollment in order to keep them safe? Should there be a residency requirement? How do the institutions engage their students in order to keep them on campus?

Current Trends and Practices

Many university safety procedures and policies have been enhanced since the rise of Boko Haram and its increased frequency of attacks. The following practices are those of two private institutions one in southwestern Nigeria and the other in northern Nigeria. While Boko Haram generally does not attack outside of northern Nigeria, the practices of the southwestern university may be applicable to institutions in the north. The southwestern institution has a 100 percent residential policy for students and an exeat policy (Covenant University, 2014). There is a day exeat and a home exeat for students who want to go outside campus. Students are permitted to obtain three-day exeats a month (Covenant University, 2014). In respect to the home exeat, each student is permitted to obtain three in a

semester. The passes are strictly issued to students with the permission of their parent or guardian. The parent or guardian must come and pick the student up and return them back to the university (Covenant University, 2014). The same institution has security and closed circuit television all over campus. There is a unit in the department of Student Affairs called Monitoring Security and Surveillance (MSS; Uche, Eche & Omonijo, 2016). Personnel in the unit are saddled with the responsibility of monitoring students' security 24 hours a day.

The northeastern university established its own internal security force and quickly developed it to protect not only the main campus but also all of the institution's properties and assets throughout the community. On campus, security personnel are at all entrances, all buildings, and roaming the campus. This institution has a curfew for its students to be on campus. The university has built strong relationships with the Federal intelligence agencies and local law enforcement are on or near campus at all times. Campus guests are required to sign in and provide valid identification. Vehicles entering the campus are checked for weapons and explosives. The campus partakes in regular active shooter(s) trainings and simulations for students, faculty, and staff. The University engages in peace initiatives in its respective community. The institution also engages in the support of people that have been internally displaced due to Boko Haram's attacks (Ensign, 2015). These policies and practices are merely examples of the measures some institutions are taking to protect themselves from potential attacks. These intentional initiatives are not necessarily widespread because of financial constraints, staffing limitations, and the complexities and intricacies of the Nigerian higher education system.

Some recommendations and best practices include institutions developing comprehensive visitor policies. These policies would state who can visit, how long a visitor can be on campus, what forms of identification are needed in order to visit campus, and visitation protocol. Universities that have the resources should consider hiring a security consultant who can assist in reviewing, developing, and implementing security policies, procedures, and practices. Institutions should invest in campus safety professional development opportunities for their staff specifically Residence Life staff. Colleges and Universities should assess why their students leave campus and try to offer similar services and products on campus to reduce students going to market places and other similar places that are targeted by Boko Haram. Lastly, institutions should participate in community engagement and peace initiatives by working with and bringing together community and political leaders.

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