

# Situational Awareness

Officer Coly / HCC Police Department

# About HCCPD

The Hagerstown Community College Police Department consists of seven full-time police officers, one part-time police officer, and two security officers. HCC police officers are fully sworn law enforcement personnel, certified through the Maryland Police and Correctional Training Commissions. The level of police experience ranges from 31 years to newly hired officers that just graduated from the Washington County Police Academy this month. Most of the current officers and command staff have previous experience with local law enforcement agencies to include: Hagerstown Police Department, Frederick County Sheriffs Office and the Washington County Sheriffs Office.

# What is Situational Awareness

Situational awareness is a mindset. It is being aware of your surroundings and identifying potential threats and dangerous situations at all times and in all areas of campus.

When you are distracted, even imminent danger or hostility can go unnoticed. Learn to be observant, even while doing other things.

Situational awareness is not only about active shooter incidents, but also other types of incidents such as severe weather, hazmat spills, and civil disorders.

Situational awareness is not about being paranoid; it is about being alert.

# Understanding Situational Awareness

Choosing to be situationally aware is essentially an act of will that typically involves three steps:

1. Understanding what constitutes the “baseline”
2. Being sensitive to “normalcy bias”
3. Refusing to be distracted by “focus lock”

The “baseline” is simply an appreciation of what is usual, common, or normal for a given environment or activity. Are vehicles parked in appropriate spots? Are doors locked that are required to be locked? Is there a fire extinguisher available and does the AED work, and if so, do I know how to operate either?

“Normalcy bias” refers to the natural human tendency to minimize the unusual to make a given situation more psychologically manageable and ourselves more comfortable. Exercises and after action reports have shown time and again that the more intensely frightening the event, the greater the urge to rationalize and discount the initial perceptions, often with unfortunate results.

# Understanding Situational Awareness (continued)

Finally, “focus lock” refers to those distractors that routinely compete for our attention that can be particularly detrimental. Whether being mesmerized by something on your cell phone or having tunnel vision in the response phase of an incident, we lose sight of the big picture.

# Examples of Situational Awareness

Here are a few things you can do to improve your situational awareness skills:

- Identify all potential exits when you enter a building
- When driving, note which cars take the same turns in traffic, or travel the same roads as you
- Look at the people around you and attempt to figure out their stories (what it appears they are preparing to do, based merely on observation)

You can do this while walking to class, going back to your car, or even driving through campus. Engaging in such simple drills will train your mind to be aware of these things almost subconsciously.

# Other examples of Situational Awareness

- Know the location and condition of emergency equipment and how to use it
- Have the Campus Police Department non-emergency phone number saved on your phone
- Know other, non-police, important campus point of contacts such as the Dean of Students or other faculty members
- Be aware of important campus buildings, such as the Student Center, where foot traffic is likely heavier.

# How do Colleges Respond to Major Incidents?

In order to provide a safe environment, HCC will:

- Ensure that employees, students, and others are adequately informed of the Emergency Management and Response Plan.
- Provide appropriate training to the college community.
- Allocate resources to provide a safe and secure campus.
- Coordinate with local law enforcement agencies.
- Provide and maintain an emergency notification system to keep employees, students, visitors, and guests informed of emergencies.
- HCC has also implemented [a notification system](#) that enables the College to send urgent text messages to student cell phones.
- HCC also maintains a campus siren system that will be sounded in the event of a campus emergency.



# **How do Colleges Respond to Major Incidents? (continued)**

Attending another college campus? You can expect similar procedures in place in the event of a major incident.

# How do you Prepare Yourself Before an Incident

- Sign up for campus alert text messages.
- Follow your school on social media (Facebook, Twitter, etc.).
- In an emergency, updates should be posted on the school website home page.
- Be familiar with your Campus Police Department or Security Office (location, phone numbers, etc.) as well as emergency equipments in buildings.
- Be sure you have the names and phone numbers of one or two of your classmates or close friends as well as their parents, and that they have yours.

# How to React During an Active Incident

"Run, hide, fight" is the response detailed on a [pocket card you can download from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security](#).

**RUN:** Have an escape route and plan in mind. Leave your belongings behind. Keep your hands visible;

**HIDE:** Do not huddle together, because it makes an easy target. Lock and barricade doors and shut off lights;

**FIGHT:** This is a last resort to be used only when your life is in imminent danger. Attempt to incapacitate the attacker. Find an object to use as a weapon, such as a fire extinguisher or chair.

Run, hide or fight is not linear and doesn't have to happen in that order. You might have to fight an attacker in order to run, for example.

# How to React During an Active Incident



Video source: <https://youtu.be/TeOdxKozra0>

# Common Mistakes to Avoid and Additional Tips

- Beware of distractions, such as walking to your car after class with your headphones on, not allowing you to hear what is going on around you.
- Do not be distracted by your cellphone, as your eyes should be up and scanning your environment, but have your cellphone readily accessible.
- Stay alert and informed about events happening on and around campus.
- Have the Campus Police phone number saved on your phone.
- When you recognize a serious incident, immediately dial 911 *INSTEAD OF* contacting the Campus Police non-emergency number.
- Walk with a friend using well-lit pathways after dark or contact Campus Police for an escort.

# Questions?

## SOURCES:

University of Louisiana at Lafayette: <https://safety.louisiana.edu/sites/safety/files/Situational%20awareness.pdf>

Campus Safety Magazine: <https://www.campussafetymagazine.com/emergency/emergency-managers-situational-awareness/>

Collegiate Parent: <https://www.collegiateparent.com/health-safety/emergencies-on-campus/>

Hagerstown Community College: <https://www.hagerstowncc.edu/docs/emergency-management-response-plan>

Federal Bureau of Investigation via Texas State University: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TeOdxKozra0>