

IACLEA AGENCY SPOTLIGHT VIRGINIA TECH

The Virginia Tech Police Department is a Nationally Accredited, full-service Law Enforcement Agency that serves the University and surrounding community. Led by Chief Wendell R. Flinchum, the Department has 52 full-time sworn police officers who are complemented by security guards, campus watch officers and safe ride officers. VT police officers have jurisdiction and legal authority on all university-owned property. Since students live both on and off campus, they work very closely and share jurisdiction with the Blacksburg Police Department, the Montgomery County Sheriff's Office and other law enforcement agencies.

The department responds to over 20,000 calls for service per year. The university currently has over 26,000 students and is constantly increasing enrollment and campus facilities.



The Virginia Tech Police Department strives to enhance the safety and quality of life for students, faculty, staff and visitors through effective law enforcement and proactive crime prevention in partnership with the university community.



In early 2009, the Virginia Tech Police Department's Community Outreach Division began evaluating the use of social media outlets to connect with our students, faculty members, visitors and the local community. As we evaluated ways to communicate with our target groups, we immediately identified Facebook as a powerful way to distribute information. When we opened our account, Facebook reported a network of accounts totaling 175 million with approximately 600,000 new users joining every day. Based on those figures, we knew that Facebook was rapidly emerging as the way for people to communicate, and was firmly established in the culture, especially with college students. The most recent numbers report that Facebook surpassed 1 billion users spanning 201 countries during 2012. We recognized that Facebook would provide us with a direct link to people, and allow us to distribute information in real time as opposed to traditional print media publications.

In the beginning, we simply created a Facebook page and provided announcements and pictures for events such as student orientation and student move in. Gradually our fan base grew and we began to see how beneficial the information we provided was to our audience based on community feedback the rapid growth of our fan base. We received favorable comments posted to our page, and our fans would also share our postings on a regular basis within their social and professional networks.

We began using the page to spotlight employee achievements and promotions, to promote community events, to bring awareness to the Virginia Special Olympics and a host of other community outreach/public service initiatives such as our student / faculty staff police academies, our self-defense classes, student orientation and our new Residence Life Resource Officer program. We also began to highlight criminal activity and request assistance from the community with investigated crimes by sharing pictures of suspects or other information. We have solved open cases and identified potential suspects by using Facebook as a resource.

A Facebook presence is a building process, as we received additional comments and more fans sharing our information, our numbers continued to escalate. Facebook provides analytical data each week regarding our page and connectivity rate. We have truly been astonished to see the numbers climb. We currently have over 10,800 fans with 86.2% of our fans in the 18-54 year old range. This demographic largely represents the age range of our students, parents and faculty/staff members. Our weekly connectivity rate averages between 18,000 and 25,000 people with a total viewing potential of 3.4 million Facebook members each week.

In conjunction with our Facebook initiative, we also started using Twitter in early 2012. We currently have over 3,384 followers, and use Twitter to send out short bursts of information about crime alerts, public safety information, traffic updates, and football game day information. We also link users back to our Facebook page and our police website for follow up information. Additionally, Facebook and Twitter are used in conjunction with our emergency notification systems to enhance our distribution for critical information.

The Virginia Tech Police Department believes that Facebook and Twitter enhances our ability to engage with our community, and provides us with a direct link to those who turn to social media as an important information source. While this is a valuable resource to connect with our community, we continue to build and maintain positive relationships with our local media affiliates and utilize alternative communication tools to augment our outreach efforts.

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