A Q&A with Steve Patterson, the University's interim chief safety officer

University Communications
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As University of Arizona President Robert C. Robbins began developing a new approach to coordinating safety initiatives throughout the University, he turned to someone who combines familiarity with campus and the community with decades of experience in safety and security at the highest levels: Steve Patterson, a Tucson native and FBI veteran.

Patterson, who is serving as interim chief safety officer while a national search is conducted for a permanent appointment, has been consulting with the University on campus safety since the fall. In this role, he oversees the newly established Office of Public Safety, which includes the University of Arizona Police Department and the Threat Assessment Management Team. He also helps oversee public-facing and public-serving units including Risk Management Services, Facilities Management and Parking & Transportation Services.

Patterson's 24-year FBI career included time as a special agent in San Francisco, a unit chief at FBI headquarters in Washington and, most recently, as the assistant special agent in charge of the FBI's Tucson office. He was a 2021 recipient of the Attorney General's Award for Excellence in Law Enforcement.

In this Q&A, Patterson discusses his vision and priorities, as well as what faculty, staff and students can do to help create a more safe and secure environment at the University.

(Editor's note: Before his interview for this Q&A, Patterson happened to meet a first-year student from out of state working in the Office of University Communications. He sparked up an impromptu conversation with her, asking her how she felt as she walked around campus, and what could make her feel safer. Patterson closed their 20-minute discussion by saying that, while work continues to make the University physically safer, he is just as committed to the heavier lift of helping everyone feel safer.)

Tell us about yourself and your professional journey in law enforcement and safety.

I'm a native Tucsonan. I was born at Tucson Medical Center and grew up in Tucson, going to University of Arizona football, basketball, baseball and softball games. I was a fairly good high school athlete and played football at Northern Arizona University. My father graduated from here in pharmacy a long time ago. My sister graduated from here, my uncle graduated from here. The University of Arizona is in my blood.

In my junior year in college, I decided I wanted to be in law enforcement. I ended up getting my master's in organizational management and had all my prerequisites to sit for the CPA exam. I applied for the FBI in hopes I could get in before I took the CPA exam because I didn't really want to take it, and I got in.

I got married to my wife a month before I went to Quantico and got assigned to San Francisco. I spent a little over seven years there working in violent crimes. San Francisco was great. We had two kids there, a girl and a boy.

After San Francisco, we transferred to Sierra Vista, Arizona, southeast of here. After about seven years there, when my kids were a little older, I wanted them to experience Washington, D.C., so I took a job at headquarters. I came back and spent about five years as a supervisor here, then have spent the last five years as the assistant special agent in charge here covering the southern third of the state.

How has your experience informed your work with the University in the past few months?

Everything about my journey factors into the work I do here. The first part is my passion for the University. When I retired from the FBI at the end of October, my intention was to stay retired, but I told everybody there was only one place I would call back – the University of Arizona. After the unfortunate events of October, I got the phone call.

The work that I've done at the FBI comes down to trying to keep this country safe. My father-in-law used to call me an overgrown Boy Scout. In a lot of ways, I think he's right. A lot of things I learned at the FBI as a leader and working long-term, large-scale investigations – those experiences are only going to help me in my current role.

What are some actions or initiatives that have been accomplished since you began working with the University?

One of the first things I did was to bring a forensic psychologist, Gene Deisinger, on as a consultant to the Threat Assessment Management Team, the TAMT team. We've also added Aaron Barnes, who is the director of Campus Health's Counseling and Psych Services, to help fortify the team and make sure we have a diversity of thought.

We've started having regular meetings about physical updates like locks on doors, more lights and things like that. I've also had a lot of meetings with faculty, staff and leaders at a lot of colleges. I spoke to one professor who had more than 20 years of experience and he told me he still finds himself going into classrooms that he's never been in before. That was
the nexus for me trying to figure out how I can get information sheets in all the classrooms so people know where they are and what to do in an emergency. That started the process to create the emergency preparedness posters that you’ll see in classrooms beginning this fall.

We’ve set up a building site survey that has gone out to building managers. We’re reworking the campus emergency response plan and are putting together a standardized emergency response plan for every building.

You oversee TAMT, the University’s Threat Assessment Management Team. Could you explain the role of TAMT and how it supports the University community?

If anybody has or sees an imminent threat, or are in imminent danger, they should call 911. There are also situations where people are just having a simple discussion. Somewhere in between there are situations where people are displaying concerning behavior. Maybe somebody says something that gives the indication that this person is in distress or their statement or actions cause reasonable apprehension, or fear of physical harm towards people or property but doesn't meet the criteria to call 911. That's where TAMT comes into play.

We have a referral process through the TAMT website. If you witness or experience an incident, click on the referral button, provide the details and we will get back with you. Most of the time it's me that will respond, asking for clarification or more information. Then we review it and make a determination of whether it's potentially a threat, whether it's an employee situation that might need to be handled administratively, or whether it's a student conflict incident where we might involve the dean of students. There are also times when we decide we need to continue to monitor it.

The team includes representatives from the Dean of Students office, Human Resources, UAPD, CAPS and Dr. Deisinger. I am the interim chair, but we have recently posted the position for a full-time, permanent chair whose sole job will be to manage the TAMT team and to educate the campus about what TAMT does and provide training on conflict resolution skills.

With the creation of the Office of Public Safety, what is your vision for aligning safety and security operations across campus?

I'm starting with a lot of conversations. We're in the process of building the structure of the Office of Public Safety. Underneath that will be UAPD, TAMT, emergency management and risk management. There's going to be some partial reporting with Facilities Management and with Parking & Transportation Services. All of those play a part in safety, so it makes perfect sense for the Office of Public Safety to be the umbrella.

My goal at first is to educate the campus on what we can do, areas we need to look at to make campus physically safer. I can make the campus physically safer, but it's going to take more work to make the campus community feel safe. That's the next step. We hope to have a lot of the physical updates done by the end of the (calendar) year. You'll even see some in place when people come back in August. But the next part will be helping people feel comfortable making a call to UAPD if they see something, helping them feel more comfortable submitting a referral (to TAMT).

President Robbins recently announced the creation of the new Campus Safety Advisory Commission, which is composed of University and community members who will advise you. Could you share more about this group and its role?

I'm really excited about this commission. It's got faculty, staff, alumni and students, so you've got a pretty good representation of the campus community. We're looking at not only some of the recommendations from the PAX report, but also the cultural changes that we need to make at the University. How do we have the conversations with groups that often feel marginalized, how do we ask them what we need to do to ensure that, if they feel like a crime has been committed or they have been victimized, that they feel comfortable making a call to UAPD?

The homework that I gave the group after the first meeting is to ask each member what they want to see the group accomplish. We are going to create actionable goals, because I don't want to waste anyone's time. I want this group to be a productive, valuable asset to the campus.

What are some of your short-term and long-term priorities?

Short term, which I'll call now through the end of the fall semester, I'm hoping a lot of the physical updates can be made. Keyless access on all the buildings will take a few years because some of the buildings are older, so building the infrastructure and electronics will take time. I want to make sure we have created a high-functioning Office of Public Safety. I want to continue to have conversations with employees, departments and students to help people feel more comfortable around this campus.

Long term, I think it's completely reasonable to think that the University of Arizona, two to five years from now, is considered the preeminent university when it comes to campus safety. I would like the University of Arizona to be considered a benchmark in this area. We want to get to a point where this campus is considered as having the highest functioning threat assessment team and the preeminent university police department in the country.

What can students and faculty and staff members do today to help create a safer environment for all at the University?
It's all about engagement. This campus is safe. That doesn't mean this campus is immune from potentially dangerous situations. We'll do all the physical updates we can, but we also need communication with the campus community.

Can you share your thoughts on the importance of building community through compassion as we work together to make our campus as safe as possible?

Everybody comes from somewhere. Everyone's experience is different. People are coming to this campus who don't know the state of Arizona. People are coming who don't know this country. We as a campus have to realize that and help each other – these are the things you can do, these are the things you can't do, here's what this sign means. We all come from different places, but we all want to feel good about ourselves and we all want to feel safe.

Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

I love this campus. My intention is to stay here and help the University become better. I want to get to a point where our discussions are more about how we can make this campus even better and less about the negative. I'm here to help everyone feel safer and be safer.

Additional information and resources

- If you feel you are in imminent danger or are experiencing an urgent workplace violence issue, call 911 immediately or contact UAPD at 520-621-8273.
- To report concerning or threatening behavior, use the incident reporting form on the TAMT website.
- The new University Safety website includes organizational actions plans, campus security updates and resources for students and employees.
- The Dean of Students office has resources to help students and those who work with students. Campus Health's Counseling and Psych Services provides counseling for students by appointment, while the SOS service can help students find support they need, including academic and advising guidance.
- Life & Work Connections provides mental health resources as well as services to support employees’ physical, financial, legal and social well-being. Faculty and staff can visit the Employee Assistance Counseling page to learn about free and confidential counseling available 24/7 through ComPsych.
- The TAMT website has links to safety resources and tools, including a workplace violence prevention and education guide. Gene Deisinger's presentation to the University community was recorded and is available as a Panopto video in the TAMT website.
- You can access the Active Shooter Preparedness video in EDGE Learning.
- You can now file a police report online through the UAPD website.