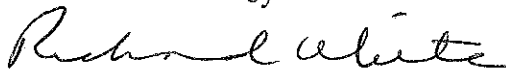
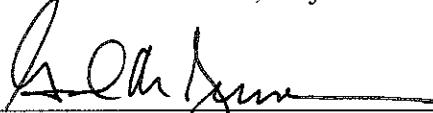


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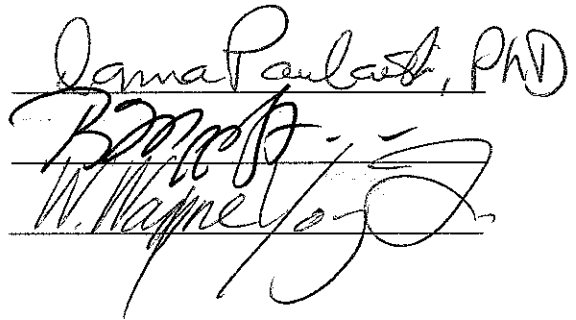
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COMMUNICATING IN TIMES OF CRISIS:
How College and Universities Alert their Campuses of Emergencies

By

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A THESIS

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Abstract

How colleges and universities communicate during times of crisis has come into sharp focus in recent years, with crisis events dominating headlines with what seems like increasing frequency and greater consequence. Concerns about communication methods are being examined to determine which has most widespread impact. Most higher education officials feel that a school's emergency communication plan must be robust and reliable while simultaneously addressing the capacity and redundancy issues of effective mass notification. In addition, the added expectations of parents and misunderstandings of the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) have more campus leaders concerned about preparing for unknown threats and determining how to best inform their campuses. This study will examine the approaches for emergency communication colleges and universities are using today and explore the proactive approaches and emerging technologies they are using going forward.

Preface

In recent years, colleges and universities have been beset by a wide variety of emergency crises that have warranted mass notification. School administrators continue to use an array of communication techniques each serving one goal – to alert the greatest population as quickly as possible.

This study is to document recent trends college campuses are using to prepare for, and most importantly, using to alert their key stakeholders of crisis. I want to understand what triggered the urgency for emergency communication by looking at the history of tragedy on campus. I hope to understand the challenges and issues presented to higher education officials when dealing with crises on campus and examine the positive and negative impact emergency communication can have on their populations. In addition to these topics, will be a reflection on current trends in emergency communication and potential solutions for the future.

Crisis is a daily occurrence at our nation's institutions of higher learning. Not all crises warrant campus-wide emergency alerts however. How school administrators decide what constitutes a crisis is a complicated question to which I hope to find answers. Colleges and universities today must also deal with parental expectations and find ways to assure the guardians of students that the university has a plan and is caring for their well being.

Campus crisis can involve many key personnel during an emergency situation. Everyone from the president, to board of directors, to media relations all have important jobs when dealing with crisis. They must not only find the right medium for the message

but also ensure that the communication is consistent and a reliable source of continuous information.

Finally, I hope to research what impact these sources of communication are having on their intended audiences. How the message is interpreted can make all the difference when alerting key stakeholders. I hope to understand the following question: Are they are using emergency alert systems to push out information too quickly? Or, has there been any research on what effect these new systems are having on campus populations?

Special thanks to the following individuals who contributed to this project: Dr. Richard White, Dr. Donna Pawlowski, Dr. Wayne Young, Deborah Daley, and Tanya Winegard.

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Introduction

"We cannot in good conscience ignore the possibility that something unthinkable can occur in our midst that will disrupt the lives of our students, faculty and staff."

- Zdziarski II, Dunkel, Rollo, & Associates. (2007, p. 336)

This quotation, written about the same time as the horrific events on the campus of Virginia Tech University, still echoes very true sentiments. Even today, many years after the shootings at Virginia Tech, Northern Illinois and Virginia's Hampton College, colleges and universities nationwide continue to develop effective and efficient emergency plans in an attempt to avoid the "unthinkable."

Campus emergency alert systems are not a new phenomenon but recent tragedies have brought a renewed scrutiny of methods by schools to communicate a campus-wide message quickly and efficiently. Institutions today are using a wide range of methods that utilize diverse communication channels to reach as many as possible. Finding the most appropriate use of these multiple technologies and researching effective operational planning and oversight is how colleges and universities today can successful get the word out.

Even without the massacre of 32 people at Virginia Tech by a student who then killed himself, it is still important for college presidents and other university administrators to involve themselves in crisis planning. A college or university is really like a small city, or even a collection of small cities. Most campuses have libraries,

theatres, classrooms, offices, restaurants, laboratories, and daycare centers. Keeping an entire city safe and constantly alert is nearly impossible; keeping a campus informed is just as difficult (Nolan, 2007).

Campus leaders constantly struggle with preparing for unknown threats and determining the best way to inform their campuses of incidents. Lester A. Lefton, president at Kent State University, said the biggest threat is an unknown event and that there is an expectation of an immediate response to a threat they do not even know about (Selingo, 2008).

The simple fact is that no campus professional can ever be prepared fully for all potential campus crises. However there are some basic actions that can be transformed, translated, and incorporated into any campus. When an event like Virginia Tech happens every college in the world probably looks at their own emergency plans and wonders if they are adequate.

Disaster preparedness is more of an evolution, than a revolution, says Tracy Worsley, emergency-preparedness manager for the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (Carlson, 2007). As long as institutions of higher learning are in constant review of how they plan to alert their community of crisis, the better off they will be at anticipating ways to communicate during campus emergencies.

Chapter One

In the weeks that followed the shootings at Virginia Tech, emergency notification systems became the phrase du jour at many colleges. Some felt that officials on the Blacksburg, Virginia campus were slow to notify their students when the shootings were taking place (Page, 2008). Others have said that the tragedy was much worse than it should have been if the university had a system in place that immediately alerted students (Herrmann, 2008). However the response was viewed, university administrators across the nation raced to fortify their institutions against any criticism they may receive if a crisis communication plan was not available. The magnitude of the Virginia Tech incident initiated a wave of deliberate introspection by institutions to examine their own systems, plans, and communication technology to determine if they were ready to manage a similar crisis.

What Constitutes a Campus Crisis?

Perhaps one of the most difficult questions school administrators face is: What defines a crisis? Better yet, what events on campus can warrant a mass communication alert and address mass hysteria?

Colleges and universities are unique places because they are decentralized institutions meant to openly welcome people for discourse and interaction. They generally feature diverse populations, foster creativity, and encourage a vibrant teaching and learning community.

By definition, a crisis situation is not something that happens in the normal day-to-day operations of an institution. There are a variety of events that can lead any

institution to an emergency situation. Zdziarski II et al. (2007) define a crisis as “an event often sudden or unexpected, which disrupts the normal operations of the institution or its educational mission and threatens the well-being of personnel, property, financial resources and/or reputation of the institution” (p. 56).

A crisis is typically a negative event that has some element of surprise. It is often sudden or unexpected and has components of limited time response. Additionally, the event generally disrupts day-to-day activity and forces individuals to improvise and innovate, typically under acute time pressure and high stress.

A crisis can be triggered by any number of events, including on-campus violence, natural disasters, disorderly protests or even controversial statements by a member of the university community. However the crisis is ignited, it is important to remember that a crisis is anything that poses a threat to the safety of an institution’s greatest asset - people. Whether it is the students (most potential) or faculty/staff (the brightest) any event that threatens their safety can be considered a crisis. Zdziarski II et al (2007) also note that one final thing to remember is that a situation only becomes a crisis when the key stakeholders agree that it is a crisis.

Of course it is nearly impossible to prepare for every conceivable type of disaster, but the best-prepared institutions can identify certain types of crisis that they are most likely to experience. At Creighton University, Deborah Daley, director of public relations, says University officials must make defining a crisis a priority early in the process of crisis planning (personal communication, March 1, 2009).

“At Creighton we currently defined nine different types of crises and worked from there,” said Daley. “But, it is important to remember that each institution is different.”

She added that it is very important to make a list of typical crisis events. This can help to develop some parameters for defining a crisis and really determine who the event affects and how the institution will respond.

How an institution defines a crisis has an effect on what system it develops. Elements such as the size of the institution can also determine the magnitude of the crisis. A small college or community college probably has different crisis criteria than a large University. No matter the size, thousands of colleges and universities in our nation must transcribe their own cultural and institutional needs into their crisis plan in order to respond correctly to future emergencies.

The History of Crisis on Campus

To better understand crises on campus today, it might be helpful to look at the history. There are hundreds of emergencies at colleges and universities each year but only a few have had the long lasting impact and far-reaching ramifications that have affected higher education crisis planning as a whole. And as media coverage has become better and more prevalent in the past 20 years, campus tragedies have become more prominent in our lives, regardless of where they occur.

One of the earliest examples of a tragic incident on a college campus is the action of Charles Whitman at the main tower building on the University of Austin campus. On August 1, 1966 Whitman, a former sharpshooter in the U.S. Marine Corps, killed 14 people and wounded 32 others during a shooting rampage on and around the campus. Even though this event happened before television coverage, the community and the nation felt its impact immediately.

Zdziarski II et al. (2007) note that the August 12, 1966, cover of *Life* magazine - one of the standards by which we as a nation gauged the importance of an event in that era - showed a photo of the Texas Tower taken by Shel Hershorn through the bullet-shattered glass of a store window in Austin.

This event, coupled with the killing of nine student nurses at a Chicago dormitory just one week earlier, laid the foundation for an increase in sensitivity on campuses nationwide. In fact, college campuses soon began developing new ways to respond to prepare for these types of emergencies. The first Special Weapons and Tactical teams (SWAT) were created at this time and are believed to be a direct response to these incidents as well (Klinger, 2009).

Tragic events on campus can also come from incidents that happen outside our borders. The first incident of international terrorism and its affect on campus students happened in the early evening of December 21, 1988. When Pan Am Flight 103 exploded and crashed into the ground in Lockerbie, Scotland, students from numerous institutions were killed returning home for the Christmas break. The crash changed how colleges viewed the safety of their students, especially Syracuse University, which had 35 students aboard. No longer were the violent acts that happened in other countries just events we witnessed on the news. How colleges viewed international tragedy was now affecting our sense of safety that formerly seemed far away.

The constant 24-hour television news coverage of campus tragedy could lay claim to some of its beginnings as a result of the events at the University of Florida in 1990. When the bodies of four students at the University of Florida and one from nearby Santa Fe Community College were discovered in Gainesville, a local community incident

immediately became a national news story. The response forced the University of Florida to use all of its resources to be able to respond immediately to the media questions. It was also one of the first times a University used the onslaught media coverage to accurately communicate with the media and keep the public informed. The coordination of official responses from the institution allowed the university to tell its story of concern and support to all who wanted to listen and then allowed the students to return to campus and resume normal operations despite an unresolved police investigation (Zdziarski II et al., 2007).

Before the University of Florida incident, universities generally had some time to coordinate and plan for media coverage. They could have time to develop a reaction to the on-looking nation after a crisis. College campuses today are forced to develop a communication plan well in advance of any tragedy or crisis and then have a standard response prepared that communicates to the public they are in control of the situation.

When dealing with a campus pandemic, the most memorable crisis occurred on the campus of the University of Illinois-Champaign (UIUC). During the 1991-92 school year, UIUC and surrounding communities were forced to deal with the bacterial infection meningococemia (Zdziarski II et al., 2007). This deadly pandemic started with simple cases of flu-like symptoms that many just attributed to the cold season. These cases were left untreated and quickly turned into blood infections and inflammation of the lining of the brain and spinal cord. Nine students in the area were infected with meningococemia and eventually three died. Fifty-seven hundred students at UIUC were given oral antibiotics and the first two students died. Over the next year, eighteen thousand were given free vaccinations in an attempt to stop the spread.

The ability for institutions to respond to large-scale pandemic such as this one was immediately instituted as part of colleges' emergency preparedness plans. In fact, most schools now communicate to incoming students prior to arriving on campus of the increased risk of infection associated with living in close quarters, like residence halls. Over 30 states urge first-time college students to consider the meningococcal vaccine and nine states – including Pennsylvania, Kansas, Louisiana, Virginia, Maryland, New Jersey, Connecticut, Massachusetts and Rhode Island – actually require the immunization to students living on campus (Burrell, 2009).

Some regions of the country are also more susceptible to natural disasters that can have an effect on their campuses. Earthquakes, such as the one that hit California State-Northridge in 1994, can cause tremendous devastation. Disasters such as these can force institutions to plan for semesters without classrooms and coordinate alternate university activities for periods of time that are needed for rebuilding.

Hurricanes are another example of a national disaster that can create destruction to higher education institutions. After several South Florida campuses dealt with Hurricane Andrew in 1991, many institutions began to develop preliminary plans for evacuation and emergency. They started to put together plans in the event that another weather-related tragedy would strike. They had no idea, however, of what was coming when Hurricane Katrina hit in 2005. Katrina touched land as a Category One and after briefly becoming a Category Five, it struck the entire Gulf Coast from Mississippi to Louisiana as a Category Three (Zdziarski II et al., 2007). Called the largest hurricane of its strength ever recorded, Katrina destroyed most areas of New Orleans and left over 800 dead. Its effect on the New Orleans universities of Tulane, Loyola, Xavier, Dillard,

Southern and the University of New Orleans were catastrophic. Many had to coordinate places for their students at other institutions and many colleges were left to rebuild without the majority of their staff who had fled the area.

When these hurricane-battered campuses remained closed for a period of months, colleges and universities across the nation offered admission to undergraduate and graduate students (Biemiller, 2005). Most offered help with financial aid arrangements, extra instructional support, and waivers of late fees. A few even offered temporary positions to faculty members from the affected colleges. Some even collected tuition and held it in escrow for the colleges of the displaced students.

Mark A. Emmert, president of the University of Washington, said at the time it was critically important for Tulane and other universities affected by this disaster not to lose revenue and to have students return to their universities as soon as they reopen, whenever that may be (Biemiller, 2005).

This coordination and cooperation set a new benchmark in terms of inter-institutional collaboration. Almost immediately after the disaster, institutions both public and private opened their doors to those students and faculty displaced as a result of Katrina. Also, the American Council on Education (ACE) and the National Association of College and University Business Officers (NACUBO) jointly developed CampusRelief.org to help students, faculty and staff during the recovery and relocation process.

Tragedies on campus can be created from any number of disasters, human-created or nature-created. How campuses protect their students from these incidents has come into sharp focus because the expanding safety issues surround college campuses today.

Campus Safety and Security

In addition to the destruction on campuses, there have also been events in terms of student safety that have affected crisis communication planning over the years. There is no doubt that crime on campus has increased over the years and if the history of campus safety is examined, some measures have been developed to make campuses safer.

In April 1986, Jeanne Cleary, a nineteen-year-old first-year student, was brutally raped and murdered while asleep in her residence hall room on the campus of Lehigh University. (Asmussen & Creswell, 1995) The person accused of the crime was a student at Lehigh and had entered the dorm through a series of propped open doors in the women's residence hall. After Jeanne's parents learned that the university failed to communicate the thirty-eight violent crimes in the three years previous at Lehigh, they joined with others to lobby for better reporting standards at colleges and universities. This tragedy immediately became national news and triggered the creation of the College Crime Awareness and Campus Security Act. This federal mandate required all colleges and universities to report the occurrence of crimes on their campuses to prospective students and families. Also, according to the Act, schools must also make timely warnings to the campus community about crimes that pose an ongoing threat to students and employees. To make sure institutions are complying, the Department of Education has issued fines to schools that fail to comply (Prevent another tragedy, 2004). Then in 1989, President Bush signed into law the Student Right-to-Know and Campus Security Act, which requires colleges and universities to make available to students, employees, and applicants an annual report on security policies and campus crime statistics (Jackson & Terrell, 2007).

Campus administrators are also mindful of the sections in the Campus Security Act specifying that crime policies, procedures and practices must be stated in their report to the Department of Education. Further, the Secretary of Education is required to identify exemplary programs that have proven effective in reducing campus crime (Fisher, 1995). All these examples of actions at the federal level are demonstrating different ways of alerting campus communities of emergency situations.

Some institutions have developed their own measures to communicate safety advice to their students. The University of Florida has created crime prevention tips, printed them on one-page flyers, and placed them in campus bathrooms. 'Stall stories' are a publication featuring stories about personal safety, crime prevention, and special security issues (University of Florida Police Department, 2009).

Campuses have also been proactive in promoting and installing security measures to make their campuses feel safer to their students. Some campuses have installed blue-light emergency telephones at strategic locations on campus that provide a direct line with campus safety and other campus police personnel. Many have also instituted "target-hardened devices" such as smart-cards to make building entry difficult and in some cases impossible for unregistered guests of the university. And while some campuses have patrols that monitor campuses at night, most have developed nighttime shuttles and transport services.

It is one thing to have the daily security measures in place, but one of the most important decisions during a crisis is when to change security operations from simply a campus service to the entity that is in control of the university. Campus safety faces some pretty difficult decisions regarding when and how to notify the institution that

security officials are now working with outside agencies to secure the campus. Being able to effectively communicate with local agencies such as police or fire departments should be part of a continual collaboration insuring smooth interactions should the need arise for outside contributions. A well thought-out communication plan can help determine when local off-campus entities should be brought in to work closely or in parallel with campus services.

A well-rounded crisis plan with good communication components can make this transition and other preparations much easier. Developing a detailed communication model in the plan is one of the initial steps in determining the type of crisis and how to properly communicate key information at specific stages. The next chapters will discuss how crises on campus can evolve and how to best structure the crisis management plan to ensure effective communication.

Chapter Two

Levels and Types of Crisis on Campus

Dealing with crisis on campus is an ongoing process of planning, responding, reevaluating/learning in a never-ending cycle. How school administrators go about setting up their plans has to do with the culture of the institution and the priority they place on emergency communication.

No matter the institution's size, all colleges and universities are forced to determine and develop different levels of crisis when structuring their crisis communication plan. Smaller institutions may function with greater informality while larger institutions may have a more detailed structure, and the three-ring binders to prove it. As long as the plan has continual, ongoing contact with key individuals, any communication plan can have success.

By analyzing and establishing different levels of crisis early on in the process, campuses can identify the scope or magnitude of the crisis. Zdziarski II et al. (2007) believe in three true levels in most emergency situations; critical incidents, campus emergencies, and disasters. Other institutions have labeled these types using such nomenclature as sudden crisis, ongoing crisis and unusual crisis types (Mitroff, Diamond, & Alpaslan, 2006). The label is less important, as long as institutions can distinguish the scope of smaller scale incidents from large catastrophes.

In examining Zdziarski II et al.'s levels, crisis events that might not have an effect on the entire campus should really be categorized as critical incidents. Critical incidents could have an effect on a part of the campus or a specific group of people. Critical

incidents, however, do not affect or disrupt the normal operations of the institution overall. Some common examples of critical incidents may be a suicide attempt, facility fire, or underage drinking at a fraternity house. This type of crisis is typically sudden and requires immediate action but may not put multiple lives at risk. Despite being small in nature, critical incidents could provide a good opportunity to test and train for large-scale events. If left mismanaged, however, critical incidents could easily become full blown disasters. A festering problem left unattended, such as health outbreak, could lead to a large-scale problem very quickly. In fact, no matter how a crisis ends up, it is important to note that at some point every event starts as a critical incident.

The second level, campus emergency, is typically an event that disrupts the orderly operations of the institution or its educational mission. Campus emergencies require the entire institution to assess multiple issues campus-wide and may require the assistance of outside resources. Such things as campus riots, bomb threats or a campus power outage may inhibit the University's ability to function and adequately provide necessary services to its constituents. Some institutions have referred to these types of events as a smoldering, or ongoing, festering crises that may start small but get bigger very quickly. The real difference between campus emergencies and critical incidents is the scope of the event. Critical incidents may only affect a small group of people whereas campus emergencies can compromise a majority of the campus and in turn inhibit the ability of the institution to respond.

The crisis event that is perhaps largest in scale is a full-blown disaster. Disasters have a major impact on the campus and not only impact the college but perhaps many in the surrounding community as well. Disasters have not only a large-scale physical effect

but also an extreme emotional impact on those involved. Hurricane Katrina is the best recent example of a large-scale disaster. Events such as Katrina compromise virtually every facet of the institution and require numerous outside agencies and resources to assist the situation. Disasters severely scar all those who witness the event and typically have yearly remembrances that keep the experience in the memory.

Whether the campus labels the event as a critical incident or a full-blown disaster, the intentionality should also be noted. The concept of intentionality determines whether the crisis occurs on purpose or by accident. Unintentional crisis events are acts that are unexpected or the result of an unanticipated action such as workplace injuries, falls, or unanticipated illnesses (Zdziarski II et al. 2007). An intentional crisis occurs when individuals take purposeful steps to cause an event that has an impact on others such as sexual assault, riots, and arson. The response to an unintentional incident may focus on only one individual, however an intentional incident will typically involve at least one victim and one perpetrator.

At colleges and universities, the level and intentionality can determine the scope of the emergency, however, the crisis type can determine where and how the crisis originates. Whether the crisis originates in a facility, is caused by the environment, or has a profound impact emerging from people on campus, all higher education institutions generally fall into one of these types.

A facility crisis is one that originates in a facility or structure. Chemical spills, building fires, or a power outage can present safety concerns but generally can be isolated to a specific area and controlled as a critical incident. Widespread communication during a facility crisis is critical to keep the affected population away from dangerous locations.

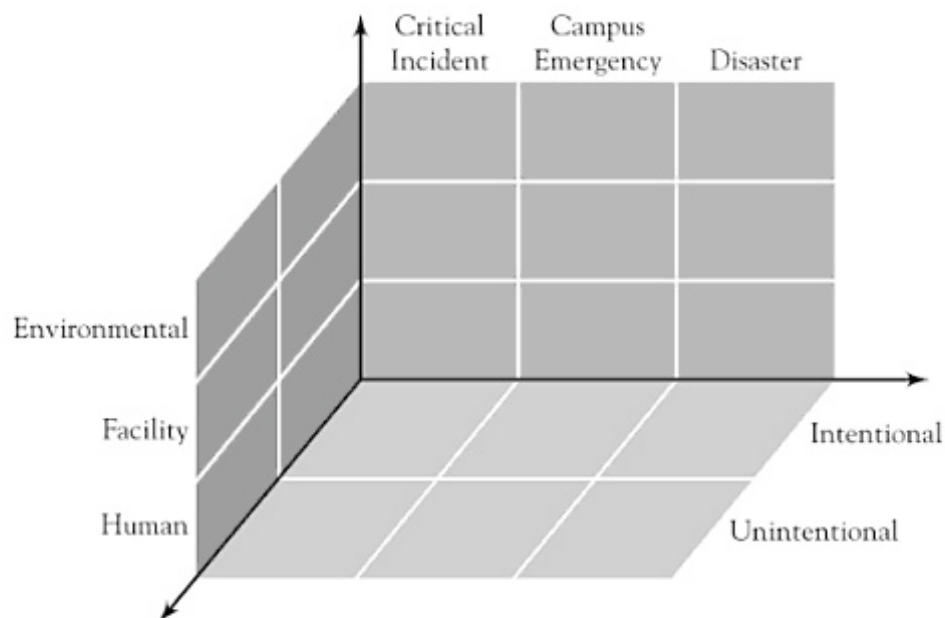
Not surprisingly, an environmental crisis is an event that originates with the environment or nature. All colleges at some point have to deal with weather and as conditions change it is important to have your community be aware of potential situations. Although the timing of these different forces of nature such as tornados, hurricanes, or floods might be easy to predict depending on the season, the response can vary depending on conditions. Many times the campus community may not be familiar with the typical climate of the region, so educating the population on potential environmental crises is essential.

A human crisis may be the most difficult to respond to. How situations affect different people are what truly can make a situation a crisis in the first place. Despite the fact that many of today's colleges and universities already have services in place to support human crises, it is hard to predict the impact events can have on specific individuals and communities on a campus. A human crisis is something that is initiated by human beings and their response to events. Sometimes human crises can result from events school administrators can control, sometimes not. Either way, human needs can be very volatile, especially in college-age students so detailed attention is very critical.

Zdziarski II et al. (2007) use these three crisis levels and the specific crisis types to create something they refer to as the “Crisis Matrix” model. They note that the crisis matrix can be translated into basic action plans that are possible to be incorporated into any campus (See Figure 1). They add that a competent sequence should include identifying the right people, selecting and building a knowledgeable and skilled response team, coordinating the required materials and necessary resources and maintaining up-to-date checklists. If these elements are completed correctly and thoughtfully, within the

context of your crisis matrix, a campus can develop the foundation and be ready to implement a successful crisis communication plan.

Figure 1: The Crisis Matrix

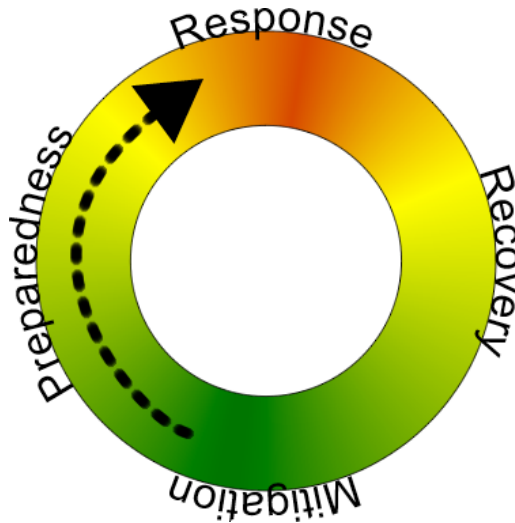


(Zdziarski II et al. 2007).

Many crisis plans at various institutions utilize a phased approach that includes a series of stages before, during, and after the crisis (FEMA, 1996). Most use some form of planning and preparedness as their initial steps and work through their end response. One familiar approach to crisis used and modeled for years has been the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) method to respond to crisis. The FEMA approach, used by federal, state, and local emergency management professionals, discusses how to make plans to prepare for crisis but also, and perhaps more importantly,

how to take direct actions to reduce the likelihood of a crisis ever happening in the first place (FEMA, 1996).

Figure 2: Federal Emergency Management Agency Phased Approach to Crisis



(FEMA, 1996).

The FEMA approach categorizes crisis into four phases: mitigation, preparedness, response and recovery (See Figure 2). The mitigation efforts attempt to prevent the crisis from happening and take long-term measures for reducing or eliminating risk. In the preparedness phase, emergency planners develop proper communication methods and warnings that include evacuation plans and emergency shelters. Responding to the crisis includes mobilizing all efforts to putting the crisis plan in place and the final phase, recovery, includes any effort to restore the affected area to its existing state. For institutions, it may also mean helping those, such as counselors, first-responders, or providers of service during the crisis.

Zdziarski II et al. (2007) offer an interesting final step to any crisis management

cycle. They say that a very important part of crisis management is that we take time to learn from our successes and failures. They add that the “learning” phase can allow an institution to update existing plans and make revisions to various protocols.

Each incident provides opportunities for us to learn from our successes and failures in responding adequately....Failure to take the time for this last step in the process is a missed opportunity for growth among individual staff and the institution as a whole. (p. 49).

I would add that in addition to this learning it might be equally important to assess where a particular institution is strong and highlight those successes for future growth. It is easy to notice the areas for improvement of a college or university, especially after a crisis occurs, but sometimes it takes some real examining to understand what processes in place actually worked as intended. For every crisis, emergency management officials and responders across the country should review and adjust their plans based on lessons learned. If institutions can do a good job of highlighting their achievements, especially in avoiding crisis events, their stakeholders may feel better about their institution’s readiness when an unanticipated disaster may indeed strike.

Developing a Crisis Communication Plan

A vital part of any institution’s crisis management plan includes a comprehensive, well-thought-out communication plan for relaying information. There is no substitute for a well-developed crisis communication plan that can train and inform staff of their roles and responsibilities during a crisis. All campuses in higher education today must have a

plan in place to address key issues that might arise as a crisis unfolds. The existence of a written plan is probably the single most important crisis management tool a campus can have and can be the foundation and groundwork from which a campus will operate. (Zdziarski et al. 2007). The challenge in crisis situations is not preparing for previous crisis but rather finding ways to anticipate responses to unidentified threats. Without proper planning, a campus' ability to communicate effectively will be extremely limited and may raise the level of the crisis even further.

Despite the importance of communication plans, there are still some institutions that admit they do not exist or are incomplete. Approximately 85 percent of institutions say that they have some type of written crisis communication plan. That leaves about 15 percent that have incomplete plans or worse, no plan whatsoever. A crisis management plan is designed to provide guidelines for a practical communications system that is adaptable for any crisis situation. If no plan is in place, institutions will struggle to determine the how and when to communicate to their institution. The next chapters will discuss different methods of communication once the crisis plan is engaged and how to most effectively reach as many as possible with the right communication tool.

Chapter 3

The big lesson is communication, at the end of the day, that's the biggest issue that you have to get your hands around... get[ting] the communication out to as many people as possible as often as possible.

- Paul J. Riccardi, dean for administration and operations at the Harvard's School of Public Health. (Marks, 2007)

Communication Methods on Today's Campuses

Once university administrators have identified that you truly do have a crisis on campus the key to alerting your campus is to establish as many different means to communicate as possible. With whom to communicate and how this communication will actually take place must be established and understood by all participants. Institutions are using various methods today but the most important concept is to find as many means of sharing information as possible and make sure your campus community is receiving it correctly.

Cross campus communication is crucial to the success of an emergency communication plan but it should not start and end in the weeks that follow a disaster. Campuses today are sprawling physical entities so keeping communication lines open all across campus is an ongoing strategy and a key component of a good communication plan.

The concept of mass notification has long been used by the federal government but is now being seen more on college campuses. Mass notification provides the ability

to deliver time-sensitive information to hundreds or thousands of people quickly and efficiently. Unfortunately, when an emergency is happening it is impossible to notify every office, residence hall or classroom. A mass notification system can provide real-time information to alert everyone concerned in time to avoid death, injury and loss of property. On college campuses, college officials must also contend with issues such as preservation of data and dealing with parents concerned for their children's well being.

Gerry Ross (2006), business development manager with SimplexGrinnell, asserts,

Second to the federal government, universities are the largest application we're seeing for mass notification systems. Universities are concerned about the security typically because the parents of students are constantly asking what added measures have been taken to protect their children. (Colombo, 2006)

There are two real types of mass notification systems. The first involves alerting people in the immediate vicinity where the emergency happens. This can include anything from large-scale public address announcements to fire alarm systems that can be heard up to a quarter of a mile away.

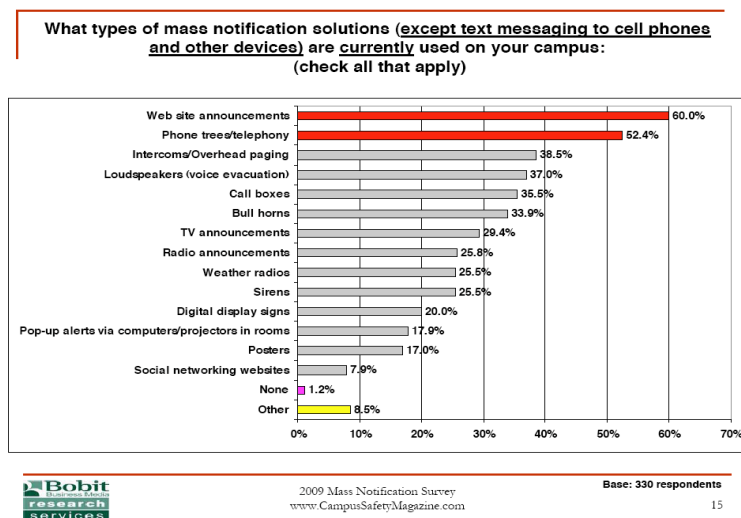
The second type of mass notification involves electronic mass messages. Using this method, word of impending disaster can be spread to all campus stakeholders through high-tech electronic systems that push a pre-programmed message through any number of devices. Such devices as pagers, PDAs, cell phones, and e-mail all are intended to transmit the emergency message in a timely manner. Most systems also have

the ability to target specific groups, such as residence halls or office buildings and the ability to send to every appropriate party simultaneously.

Mark Ladin (2006), vice president of marketing at 3n, summarizes electronic messaging by saying, “The bottom line is that by having an automated mass notification system, you don’t have to worry that you’ll miss someone. You can get them no matter where they are” (Colombo, 2006).

Vendor applications offer a plethora of opt-in services that can push emergency messages to any number of applications including cell phones, e-mail accounts, instant message accounts, or college or university voicemail systems. Many schools today are working in conjunction with a variety of third-party vendors such as Rave Wireless, Omnilert’s e2Campus, and Everbridge, Inc. These companies and many others provide college and universities with a variety of mass notification solutions and the flexibility to choose the best method for the correct situation.

Figure 3: What Method Used To Communicate in Emergencies?



Campus Safety Magazine conducted a survey in April 2009 asking over 3,500 subscribers at various colleges what mass notification systems they currently use or what solutions they are considering. Most responded (86 percent) that they currently send emergency alerts via text messages to cell phones, PDAs, BlackBerry devices and other devices. Of those institutions that used notification other than text messaging, some responded that they use alternate solutions such as web site announcements, phone trees, loudspeakers, and television/radio announcements (See Figure 3). It is interesting to note that these campuses do not just use one specific tool for communicating but a combination of multiple tools to make sure the message is pushed out through as many outlets as possible.

Gene Palma (2008), Vice President of the Long Island College and University Consortium maintains that,

Having multiple tools in order to receive emergency notifications is essential to any organization and its emergency response plan. By continuing to be proactive we hope to improve awareness of urgent university communications and increase our personal safety.

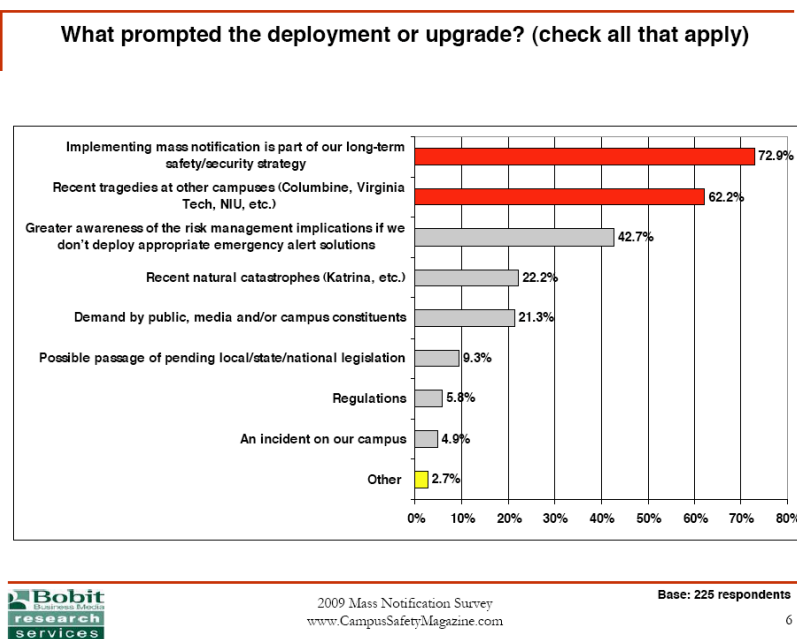
(Herrmann, 2008).

Virginia Tech and other campus tragedies have forced colleges to really think about a long-term solution to getting communication spread quickly and efficiently. Both internal and external stakeholders have seen what can happen on a campus that has poor communication and in turn have demanded that their institution have a communication

plan in place should the need arrive arise.

When those campuses that currently use a notification system were asked in the same survey what prompted the deployment of the new system, over 72 percent said that implementing mass notification was part of their long-term safety/security strategy (See Figure 4). Over 60 percent said recent tragedies at other campuses such as Columbine, Virginia Tech, NIU, etc. prompted the deployment and 42 percent were concerned that their campuses would not be as aware of risk management implications if they did not release some type of emergency management solution. This survey demonstrates clear evidence that people have recent campus crises on their mind and are beginning to pressure their institution to put something in place to protect not only themselves but their campus community.

Figure 4: What Prompted Deployment of Mass Notification Solution?



Managing Parent Involvement

One of the more difficult issues to handle when dealing with emergency communication is how to communicate with the parents of students. The dads and moms are the ones paying to send their student to the institution and expect complete and efficient answers when crisis arises. The old concept of *in loco parentis* refers to the idea that organizations such as colleges take on some of the functions and responsibilities in place of the parent. Institutions today are not using this idea as a kind of authoritarian concept but rather in terms of their responsibilities to their students, especially in terms of protectors and preparers when it comes to emergency communication (Fant, 2008).

Parents today want to be more involved in their children's lives simply because they are concerned about their student (Lederman, 2008). The question of how to fulfill the parent's needs as well as the affected student can complicate the job of school officials immensely. In *New Directions for Student Services* (2008) Lynette Merriman states that, "although college and university administrators think broadly about campus crisis, parents think more specifically about the health and safety of their student" (p. 60). This statement by Merriman is exactly what school administrators struggle with. Although the nature of parental concerns range from routine issues to critical problems, to the parent trying to reach the school, the concern is already a crisis or will quickly become one. College administrators must develop their definition of crisis when developing communication systems but today they must also be cognizant of the increase in parental involvement.

It is important that crisis communication does not leave parents out of the information loop when it comes to their crisis plans. The communication plan needs to

be thorough enough to not only make those constituents on campus aware of what is happening but also be able to notify those stakeholders who are off campus - such as parents. As stakeholders, parents are defining crisis everyday. It is important to keep parents informed so they do not feel every single concern they have is not a crisis.

There are some benefits to keeping parents both satisfied and involved in the emergency community process. To be honest, parents can actually have an important role in the communication process if dealt with correctly. School officials are always in need of being able to contact someone on the behalf of the student if they are not able. The contact information of parents is generally reliable and they are typically aware of the best way to reach their son or daughter. By utilizing the parents and making them part of the communication process they feel both involved and aware of developing situations. However, it is still very critical that students continue to provide the school with their up-to-date cell phone numbers and important to empower parents to create a regular communication plan with their student.

Campus planners can also find ways to educate students and their families about the institution's emergency plans for preparedness. This can be done a number of ways but is probably best at first contact - possibly as part of a college orientation or when a parent first arrives on campus. Most institutions should also be attempting to collect designated phone numbers of a family member or friend outside of the campus area. Students should also be encouraged to list an In Case of Emergency (ICE) phone number and update it regularly as part of the university student record.

School officials can openly provide information on evacuation plans to parents as well. According to Merriman (2008), institutions prone to environmental disasters such

as hurricanes have students and parents develop and submit an evacuation plan to the school early in the process. They need to demonstrate what their plan would be for evacuation and points of contact during and after the crisis. This idea may not be a long-term answer but at least the process allows the student and parent to think about disaster planning.

From the moment a parent arrives on campus, it is essential to demonstrate care and attentiveness as well. In addition to wanting the most current information, many parents just want to know the University has empathy for their situation. Campus responders must be problem solvers because parents today are contacting colleges and universities at a greater rate than ever before. Campus responders need listening skills, patience, effective communication skills, and problem solving skills to diagnose and address parent's concerns.

As Lynette Merriman (2008) notes, "For some parents, talking with an administrator will successfully resolve their concerns during a crisis. Parents may not be ready for detailed information, but an explanation of care and a campus contact person should be provided" (p. 63).

Parents should also be made aware of where to look for information. If parents can not easily find what they need, the first place they think to call is the university's main phone number. A parent website can be used to assist the communication flow to parents during crisis. Of the institutions that have a communication plan for parents most say a parent website is the first place they direct parents (Merriman, 2008). This is exactly the reason that the parent website can and should be used as a emergency communication tool.

Parents today just simply want to be informed. Websites directed at parents are helpful as long as the flow of information is continuous - regardless of its completeness or accuracy. Keeping the communication constant, even before a crisis occurs at a college or university is a good way to demonstrate to the parents that the institution cares. Parents today are increasingly involved because they want to feel confident that the student's college or university is prepared to take care of their student should a crisis arise. Whether it's through web pages, newsletters, presentations, or conversations any communication that provides comfort to parents throughout the lifecycle of a crisis is an advantage to both the student's families but also, in the long run, the university (Foubert, Garner, Golden, & Miller, 2006).

While a parent website may be a good alert tool for communicating with parents, as stated before it is important to open as many communication lines as possible. A true mass communication plan should go much further than a single message distributed through a single communication solution. Despite the fact that most students, faculty and staff carry mobile phones with them most of the time, an effective system involves more than just finding the best ways to contact that cell phone. A good plan finds ways to coordinate all communication channels to reach as many as possible, by as many ways as possible. Ideally this includes sending simultaneous information to multiple outlets and providing authorities a single point of entry to activate and distribute a consistent message across all communication media.

Today's campuses seem to be solving many of their emergency communication solutions primarily by finding the best uses of technology. Institutions today feel that by using electronic notification they have less chance of missing someone and can get the

intended message to their stakeholders no matter where they are. Most feel electronic mass notification enables campus officials to send word of the situation to the entire student body and faculty with a single action, which in turn frees them up to attend to other matters (Colombo, 2006).

A technology solution helps this process immensely. Using technology for crisis communication can provide a continuous flow of critical information via diverse communication channels alerting students, faculty and parent communities efficiently. Some the recent solutions and their effectiveness are evidenced in the next chapter.

Chapter Four

Using Technology for Communication Alerts

Using technology for mass communication really boils down to convenience, cost and finding the right mainstream tool. Being able to communicate to a large, widespread audience requires school officials to think about the best method with the least chance of missing someone. Herrmann (2008) notes that a recent survey by the Association for Communications Technology Professionals in Higher Education shows schools are focusing more on e-mail, text and voice alerts to contact their students than any other method.

Michael McNair, Chief Public Safety Officer at American University in Washington, D.C., agrees with the survey and adds, “Schools are looking at any kind of methodology to ensure that we can reach the maximum number of people in the shortest amount of time. If one system is unavailable, another may be available “(Kern, 2008).

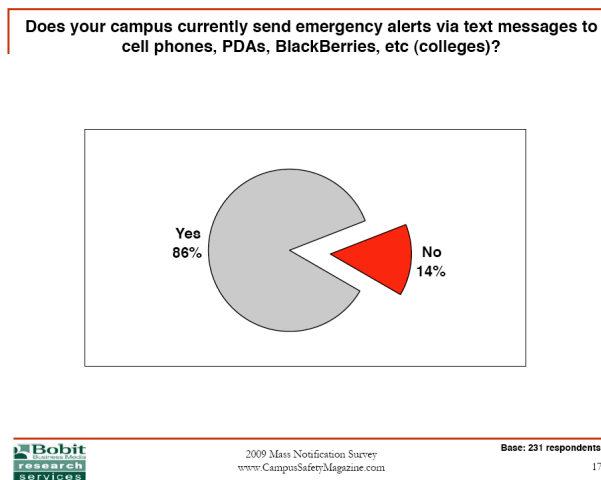
Institutions today are doing more than just relying on old-fashioned word-of-mouth communication. By using overlapping technologies such as SMS text messaging, email, and websites an institution can spread the emergency communication throughout the entire campus quickly and efficiently.

SMS and Text Messaging Alerts

The popularity of SMS messaging, especially among the college-age demographic, has encouraged school administrators to adopt text messaging as the single most important emergency notification strategy. The vast majority of a campus

population has a mobile phone and it is typically the one communication device that is accessible to people at all times. The ubiquity of cell phones is one of the main reasons many campuses are using them as the focus of their communication strategy. In fact, *Campus Safety Magazine* (Mass Notification Survey, 2009) asked over 3,500 subscribers at various colleges if they use text messaging to send their emergency alerts; the majority answered yes (See Figure 5).

Figure 5: Emergency Alerts via Text Message?



Mass Notification Survey, April 2009. *Campus Safety Magazine.com*.

There is no doubt that text messaging is probably the most convenient and inexpensive ways to keep in touch with the people. The service of sending an emergency text message is fairly straightforward. In most cases, students, faculty and staff are urged to register by giving the university their cell phone numbers. Then the emergency text message application converts the numbers into e-mail addresses and sends out a scripted message to the bulk list as SMS messages as quickly as possible. And unlike a phone

call, an SMS message is automatically stored to be retrieved and re-read at a later time. Text messaging is really just silent communication between two individuals but because of that discreet nature users can stay in touch with the audience with a minimum amount of disturbance (Enck, Traynor, McDaniel, & La Porta, 2005).

A 2006 survey from Pew Internet and American Life Project, a Washington-based nonprofit organization, provides further evidence of SMS communication as a positive contact tool. They said that more than 70 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds own a cell phone, and 92 percent of them text message. Amanda Lenhart, a researcher for Pew adds further evidence when she says (2007),

Young people today are incredibly wired, and administrators have the technology at their fingertips — once they put it in place. What better way is there to get in contact with people who always carry technology, or are within shouting distance of it? This is a huge development in terms of school security. (Dobnik & Foley)

This quote demonstrates the reason text messaging is the obvious choice for an alert strategy on a college campus. Cell phones are already being used as the primary communication tool and now institutions are starting to add their emergency alert technology with them.

Website Presence and Blog Alerts

One alternative to an alert over SMS is creating and maintaining an up-to-date website to post emergency warnings. A clear, concise website can prove to be one of the

most important communication channels because they can provide a reliable source of continuously updated information throughout a crisis. The website can be set up to be the focal point for information and can be prepared to highlight only the essential information and most critical to the crisis.

During Hurricane Katrina many state departments in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, and Florida used their websites as primary points of reference for hurricane-related information and news. Florida, for example, posted Katrina-related closings at community colleges and universities and displayed information regarding student support service resources (Carr, 2006).

An institution's crisis plan should include specifics detailing the decision to update the message on the crisis homepage. Administrators and those creating the university's emergency procedures should work very closely with those responsible for maintaining the school's web presence, such as the information technology (IT) web coordinator, to maintain solid communication throughout the crisis (Joly, 2008).

Colleges and universities are also encouraged to create partnerships with others to overcome a worse case IT scenario. Some campus emergencies could incapacitate the infrastructure which would render the website communication useless. One idea for colleges is to develop a partnership with another school for hosting their website during a crisis. Schools can use this partnership as an inexpensive alternative than paying for an outside vendor to provide off-campus hosting solutions as necessary (Molinski, 2008). Stanford University, for example, has an agreement in place with Duke University where if in a crisis situation, the other institution will host their website (Joly, 2008).

There are a few other ways to make a website's emergency communication plan

successful. Some say it is a good idea to create an additional stripped-down version of the homepage that loads quickly and can handle the increase in traffic. Another idea is to add extra web servers in case of system failure and to handle the increase in amounts of web traffic.

Despite the tragic events of April 16, 2007 on the campus of Virginia Tech, the Blacksburg institution could have had additional problems had they not made previous preparations for a “light version” of their homepage to disseminate campus information. By creating a “home page light” template they handled the millions of web visitors in search of answers from university officials. Despite the enormous increase in web traffic, (more than 1 million visits per day) the website never went down (Joly, 2008).

Also, as demonstrated at the University of Wyoming, other computer resources can be overwhelmed if proper preparations are not made. Zdziarski II et al. (2007) note that “following the brutal beatings and subsequent death of openly gay student Matthew Sheppard, public outcries both of sympathy and expressing hatred and bigotry toward homosexuals overloaded the Universities network through email and internet traffic” (p. 16). As a result, the university was not able to respond effectively using its default communication methods such as electronic mail and web updates.

A final idea is to prepare the communication website using a blog format to keep details at a constant, updated pace. A blog is essentially a weblog or online journal that is frequently updated and intended for the general public to read. Blogs today have become an incredible tool for empowering key people to publish critical updates very quickly. Blogs require little training and the format automatically timestamps all text updates and places the updates in reverse chronological order. Blogs have become a popular choice at

a number of institutions faced with major crises including Virginia Tech, Union University, and Northern Illinois University.

Facebook, Twitter, and Social Networking

The final emerging electronic technique is communication through social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter. As noted earlier, any way to put the information at students' fingertips is essential and the popularity of familiar social networking tools to share news and information among students is proving useful on campuses.

Colleges have started to encourage students to become "friends" with emergency management groups on Facebook creating an alternate pathway for pushing information to a wide audience. The University of Maryland was one of the first schools to utilize Facebook to send emergency alerts and updates on campus (Kern, 2008). At Maryland, university officials post a message on their University of Maryland profile and all users (who have added the Maryland profile as a friend) can receive the message the next time they log in. Purdue University is one of many universities that has also created an emergency notification group on Facebook. The Purdue site allows users to create profiles, share photos and join networks of users based on interest, affiliation or location.

Michael McNair, chief public safety officer at American University, agrees that social networking is having a positive impact on emergency communication and adds that, "I thought Facebook was a pretty good idea because students do not get information the same way people in the past used to get it. They aren't watching TV as much or listening to commercial radio" (Kern, 2008).

Most students agree with McNair and believe that the new forms of technology

students are using daily might be the best way to connect with them. Julie Munroe, a junior in the College of Arts and Sciences at American, comments that the current mass e-mails that schools send probably are not even opened by students. She adds that Facebook is the kind of thing that students can not really ignore, with most checking it multiple times an hour (Kern, 2008).

Some colleges have even paid Facebook to post ads in social networks to get the attention of their students. When a suicidal gunman was reported at the University of Wisconsin, the school sent out mass emails and paid Facebook \$100 to post a flier on the UW-Madison social network to warn students (Dobnik & Foley, 2007).

Third party vendors have also started offering new services that connect Facebook with the newest fad being Twitter. Twitter is another form of social messaging and works similar to Facebook but can also push short detailed communication text directly to handheld devices. When e2Campus added Twitter and Facebook as options last November, Pacific University in Oregon was the first institution to jump on board. e2Campus has been creating functionality that allows any student with a Twitter or Facebook account that "follows" (on Twitter) or is "friends with" (on Facebook) the university to receive the message. Without e2Campus, the university would have to log into its account on each social networking site, craft a message, and deliver it individually (Briggs, 2009).

When websites are not available or are incapacitated due to the large volume of traffic, both blogs and Facebook can both prove very helpful. When a tornado destroyed much of the campus at Union University in Tennessee and took down power for a few days, the website went down as well. Without their key information communication tool,

University officials decided to set up an online blog hosted by Google with a web address of www.uuemergency.com (Joly, 2008). Union officials published updates, photos and answered questions via the ad hoc blog site. They also shared updates through their university Facebook page. Without these two communication efforts the University would not have been able to effectively communicate with students, parents, alumni, friends and volunteers.

Facebook and social networking sites are rapidly changing the way people on campuses are getting their information during an emergency situation. When the public wants to know exactly what is going on and does not want to wait for a news conference they are accessing online social networking sites for information. A clear example of this is the fact that before administrators at Virginia Tech officially identified the 32 victims shot and killed on campus, the names were already known and shared across the Internet through Facebook (Snider, 2008). The challenge now for emergency planners is to decide how to best utilize social networks and find ways to connect them with the official, accurate sources of information.

Problems with Electronic Alerts

Contacting students through technology whether through websites, text alerts, or social networking is an efficient and effective way of contact, but it is not without its problems. Many place conditions on crisis communication technologies today to demonstrate that they meet the requirements of emergency operations. Some technologies do prove very useful in crisis situations while others have extraordinary obstacles they must overcome before being seen as a viable option.

Bambenek and Klus (2008) outline several characteristics that new technologies must possess to become good sources of emergency communication. They first note that emergency communication must be extremely reliable no matter the time of day or period in the semester. They should also have excellent access control and not allow imposters to communicate bogus messages. The final, and perhaps most important, is the high speed of delivery. Bambenek and Klus argue that text messaging, for instance, does not meet all three of these requirements. They added that SMS text messaging suffers from several disadvantages including inherent design problems, the opt-in process, character limits, and vulnerability to abuse (Bambenek & Klus, 2008).

In addition to the technical problems with SMS communication, Herrmann (2008) argues that some students, faculty and staff have been slow to embrace text messaging notification, due to the feeling of invincibility, a reluctance to give out personal information, and in some cases, the fees that some cell phone providers charge to send and receive texts.

Although text messaging is widely used for how quickly it can get the message into the hands of its intended users, the results are somewhat deceiving. The time it takes for messages to be received depends largely on the number of users in the list. Anecdotally, technologists who have tested the system for colleges and universities report a 15–60 minute range for receipt of messages. This delay is on top of the time it takes for a 911 call to be initiated, for a dispatcher to gather information, and for the appropriate decision maker to authorize sending the message (Bambenek, & Klus, 2008).

There is also the issue of overwhelming a cellular network by sending a flood of SMS messages to specific users in a concentrated geographic location. For instance, an

emergency message sent to a large group of users in a tightly confined area of campus would likely be associated with the same cellular towers. This message is also competing and probably interfering with normal voice communication. Delayed messaging in a campus emergency is inconvenient and poses the risk of turning an already bad situation much worse.

Latimer (2008) notes that a recent study found 91 percent of SMS messages were delivered in less than five minutes, but the same study determined that approximately 5.1 percent of messages were not delivered at all. In comparison, end-to-end message loss for e-mails was only 1.6 percent — and likely much less when considering internal campus e-mail distribution. Text messaging may seem like a quicker, better way to deliver the message but if some never make their destination the reliability loses all value.

SMS technology was never designed as a crisis communication system and its intended purpose was not to be used for real-time mass notification. SMS messaging was designed as a unicast message system to support low-volume, one-to-one communication and not large-scale blasts of messages to large user groups (Latimer, 2008).

No matter how fast the message gets there, the text message must also be seen as credible by the recipient to be effective. The lack of authentication of the sender can also seriously undermine the system. Unfortunately, many campuses publish student phone numbers on the web and many people put their phone numbers on social networking pages such as Facebook or MySpace. Since text messaging systems are a fairly new technology they are particularly vulnerable and easy to exploit in most cases. Making numbers available and easily accessible allows savvy web users the ability to send bogus text message blasts.

Other risks faced by using text messages includes preventing someone from forging an emergency message leading victims to the threat instead of away from it. False messages to cell phones are extremely difficult to prevent, and more people are seeing spam SMS messages on their cell phones lately, especially as more services support the technology (Bambenek & Klus, 2008).

One example of an SMS hoax happened at Granger High School in West Valley City, Utah. At Granger they experienced a situation where an SMS hoax was sent from an imposter telling of an imminent shooting on the high school campus. This hoax caused immediate mayhem throughout the school and a variety of misinformation that was spread throughout the school (Latimer, 2008).

In some cases, panic can also result from a simple test of the emergency communication system. In 2007, officials at Central Lakes College, in Brainerd, Minnesota, sent a message to campus email accounts and cell phones warning of a gunman on campus. The message was meant to be a test but led to mass hysteria on campus (Carlson, 2007).

In an effort to achieve stronger name recognition of authentic communication most institutions have now branded their emergency communication strategies. For example the University of Georgia (UGAlert), Creighton University (CUAlert), and Notre Dame (NDAlert) all have developed standard names in an effort to avoid misleading their communities and create awareness about their communication solutions. In spring 2007, Texas A&M implemented e2Campus' SMS text messaging, naming it "Code Maroon" after the school color. The only problem, however, is that out of approximately 54,000 students, faculty, and staff on campus, only 57 percent are

currently enrolled (Herrmann, 2008).

This lack of participation is another text messaging problem for school administrators (Young, 2008). Whether an institution chooses an optional or a mandatory participation model for its mass notification system, the key in the overall success or failure of SMS messaging is active participation. Alert systems are only effective when the institution has the ability to contact the entire audience affected. If only a small portion opts-in to the program only a small portion of the population can be made aware of the situation.

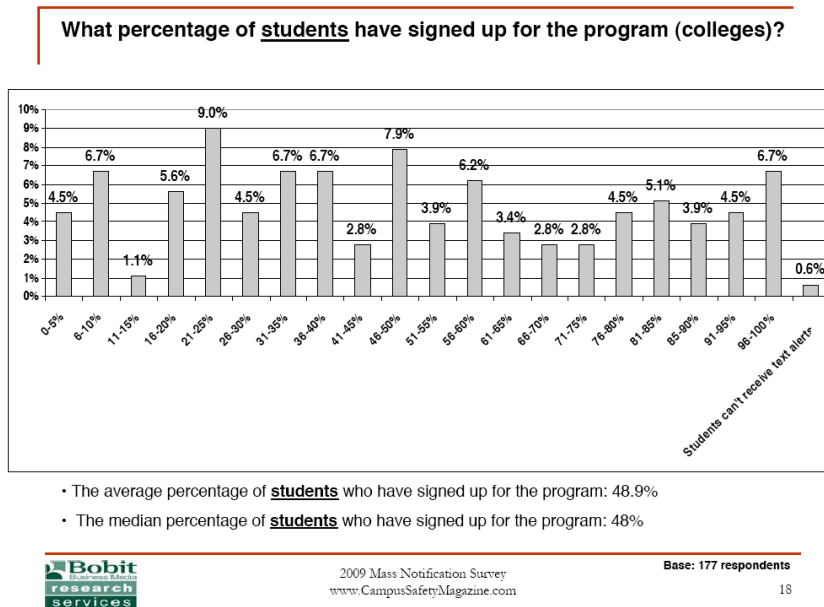
For a small sample size, I took data from our nation's Jesuit colleges and universities to see how they encourage students, faculty and staff to 'opt-in' by adding their cell phone numbers. There are currently 28 Jesuit universities spreading from coast to coast in the United States and enrolling over 183,000 students (Jesuit Colleges and Universities, 2009). Jesuit institutions range from major research universities and comprehensive universities to smaller colleges and universities that combine liberal arts and professional studies. Table 1 (next page) details Jesuit schools relying on text alerts to notify their populations and how many use optional participation. Out of the 18 schools surveyed all said they use email and text alerts to contact their students during an emergency. But when they were asked if they require students to participate or simply encourage them through an opt-in process, only two responded that they have mandatory participation. It is interesting that so many schools are using (or want to use) text alerts but only a few require participation. And while some schools may urge users to periodically verify their decision to opt-in (or not) through an application students are already using, such as their student records systems, very few are forcing them to do it.

TABLE 1: Jesuit Emergency Alerts Summary

Jesuit Institution	Email Alerts	Cell Phone Text Alerts	Students must opt-in for Text Alerts	Other Alert Technology
Boston College	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Canisius College	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Creighton University	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Fairfield University	Yes	Yes	No	
Fordham University	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Gonzaga University	Yes	Yes	N/A	Limited outdoor speaker system; Citizens Emergency Response Team CERT
Loyola College – (MA)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Outside sirens, email notification, phone mail announcements, and indoor fire alarm speakers.
Loyola Marymount University	Yes	Yes	No	
Loyola University – New Orleans	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Marquette University	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Rockhurst College	Yes	Yes	Yes	
University of Scranton	Yes	Yes	Yes	
Seattle University	Yes	Yes	Yes	Text messaging, e-mail and RSS feeds, emergency messages can be sent simultaneously to registered campus community members via cell phone, home phone, and WiFi-enabled devices.
St. Louis University	Yes	Yes	Yes	
St. Joseph’s University	Yes	Yes	Yes	
St. Peter’s College	Yes	Yes	Yes	
University of Detroit-Mercy	Yes	Yes	No	
The Xavier University	Yes	Yes	Yes	

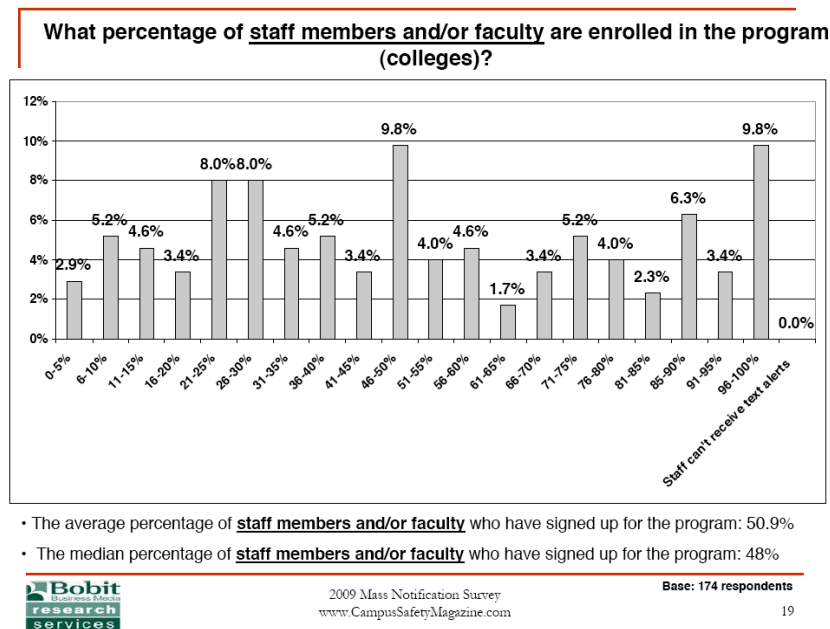
Source: Gros, 2008. Jesuit Emergency Alerts Summary compiled by Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities and Conference of Registrars (CORE)

Figure 6: Percentage of Student Signed Up?



Mass Notification Survey, April 2009. *Campus Safety Magazine.com*.

Figure 7: Percentage of Faculty/Staff Signed Up?



Mass Notification Survey, April 2009. *Campus Safety Magazine.com*.

Keeping their cellular numbers and other contact information up-to-date is also part of the other problem. Students, faculty and staff who have cell phones typically change their phone every couple years and sources indicate that the cellular industry has an annual churn rate of around two percent (Latimer, 2008). While most users transfer their same number to the new carrier, ensuring the accuracy of the new contact number in the system creates another burden for the institution.

The lack of participation is also not only with the students. Faculty and staff are just as unlikely to sign up for the service. Figures 6 and 7 of the April 2009 *Campus Safety Magazine* survey (previous page) show the participation level of both faculty and staff fairly low as well. The approximate participation for both is less than 50 percent. (Mass Notification Survey, 2008)

Active participation is a source of constant frustration for school officials and keeps administrators always striving for new ways to create connections. Even though participation, and opt-in functionality, may only seem to affect text messaging, it also can have significant repercussions on messages through emergency websites and social networking models. In both cases, users still have to physically access these sites for more information and be aware of the right time to do it. And on a fundamental level, they must have some kind of Internet access provided to them during the time of crisis. Without a method for access and some direction of where to look, using the web can become ineffective as well.

The final problem has nothing to do with the audience that receives the message but rather the detail of the message itself. Because SMS only supports 160 characters,

messages are often cryptic. Longer messages are broken down into 160 character sequences. As a result, administrators are struggling to find ways to develop clear, consistent messages but also be aware of the space limitations of SMS technologies. If they put too much information into the message, the communication may be cut off; too little information and it may confuse or prove not informative enough (Enck et al., 2005).

However a school uses its electronic alerts it should be aware of the significant drawbacks each have. Every complication in emergency messaging can have large-scale ramifications as institutions are trying to make sure the message is conveyed appropriately. Whether the institution uses email, a website, text message or even social networking, getting the message out quickly seems like the easy part. Making sure the message is received, understood and interpreted correctly highlights one of the biggest challenges university officials face and something discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Five

The Impact of Emergency Alert Communication

Creating the message and determining the mode of delivery is only the first half of emergency communication. The other significant portion deals with making the intended impact on the correct audience. A variety of questions can surface after determining the emergency message and the mode of delivery. School administrators sometimes wonder who should send the message and what impact this decision will have on the university stakeholders. They also question if the message will be decoded and interpreted correctly. Finally, they may face the challenging privacy hurdles that accompany sending mass communication.

Communication is so critical because typically the perception of an institution handling the crisis is equally as important as the real-time response. Most crisis communication experts believe that if a crisis is not handled right in the first hour or less, the opportunity to restore confidence and minimize damage might be permanently lost (Carr, 2006).

It is important to remember that vital news travels very quickly. But some institutions always think the faster you get information into the mainstream web culture the faster it will be digested. The truth however is that no matter how much you invest in computer wizardry, if you do not have an open communication culture you can not improve crisis alerts simply by using technology.

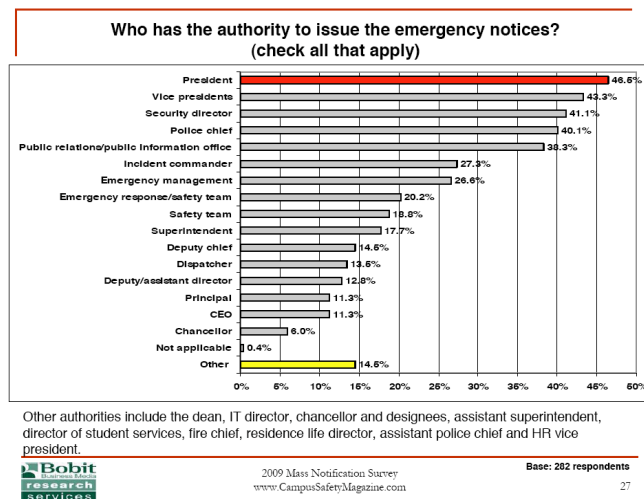
Bambenek and Klus (2008) are concerned with how quickly institutions are pushing out information following a crisis. They believe there is significant

consequences of administrators responding as if they were facing the absolute worst-case scenario. They add that the cultural reaction to alert systems all but forces their overuse by administrators and unquestioning compliance with emergency instructions by recipients.

The information may be important but personal communication from respected campus officials is what sometimes makes the difference. Institutions should give careful thought and consideration to who should be the campus spokesperson during and following a crisis. Most institutions have to immediately address the question of which university official should have the ability to send these messages when setting up a communication plan. Campus police as well as highly ranking administrators generally have the authority and capability to send an emergency message at any time but at each institution that may not be the best fit. *Campus Safety Magazine* (2009) found that most institutions have their presidents, vice presidents, security director, or public information directors as the authority for issuing emergency communication (See Figure 8).

The most common mistake communicators make is having the president say one thing but the university responding a different way. Some campuses feel it is important for the president or campus leader to be at least seen in a time of crisis. During a crisis is not the only time the campus community or local media should hear the president's voice; and a track record of routinely interesting, thoughtful presidential communications can strengthen the president's ability to communicate through difficult times (McGuire, 2007). Most public relations officials say that it is essential that the college's chief public relations officer be party to deliberations and provided the opportunity to contribute perspective as well (Powell, 2008).

Figure 8: Who Issues the Emergency Notice?



Mass Notification Survey, April 2009. *Campus Safety Magazine.com*.

Whoever is seen as the campus spokesperson, a consistent, appropriate response is what makes the message important. Most people generally want to know the answers to five basic questions from the campus spokesperson during the crisis: (1) Are my family and I safe? (2) What have you found that might affect me? (3) What can I do to protect myself and my family? (4) Who caused this?, and (5) Can you fix it? (Carr, 2006).

Marc Wolfson, public affairs officer for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, says that while having answers to these questions may not take the pain away, a proactive communication approach might prohibit additional anguish and harm (Carr, 2006). The crucial bond that holds everything together is understanding the message the spokesperson is relaying to internal constituents, external stakeholders, and the media and making sure multiple experts are not sending mixed messages.

The Effect of Student Privacy

As campus leaders are trying to gather all the information for alerting their community, they may come across barriers with what they think may be confidential information about their students. One of the obstacles school administrators must overcome is how to obtain better knowledge of the problems of students versus the continuing debate over privacy concerns. Some of this confusion is contributed to their misunderstanding of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, the federal statute known as FERPA, that protects student privacy. School administrators need to be able to contact someone on the student's behalf if they are not able to do so. Tribbensee and McDonald (2007, August 6) have argued in last Fall's edition of *Inside Higher Ed* that these campus emergencies prove the need to amend FERPA in order to permit greater disclosure of information about troubled students. In the wake of Virginia Tech, there has been a renewed interest in clarifying exactly what colleges and universities can release to the public.

Most institutions believe that federal privacy laws often prevent their universities from disclosing the entire history of students to interested parties. It is these same laws that provide several gray areas that leave administrators feeling paralyzed when dealing with notifying the right assistance for a student. Rikleen (2007) notes that if you ask any campus official about how they respond to student complaints about a stalker on campus the answer will inevitably be filled with uncertainty and ambivalence. Overreact and fear a lawsuit but the consequences of under reacting, we know can be catastrophic.

In reality, however, FERPA allows more than most schools realize. In many

cases new regulations have demonstrated to schools that FERPA only goes so far, and that the schools have the discretion to release certain kinds of records. For example, FERPA expressly permits the disclosure of information from a student's records "...to appropriate parties in connection with an emergency if knowledge of the information is necessary to protect the health or safety of the student or other individuals" (Tribbensee, 2007, August 7).

FERPA also does **permit** but does not **require** colleges and universities to notify a student's parents of certain drug and alcohol violations of the institution's disciplinary code. Many institutions do not notify parents of every incident such as a minor illegally in possession of alcohol, choosing instead to begin with an educational intervention to assist the student in making better choices, and only notify parents in cases of repeated, serious, or dangerous violations.

At the same time, the rules do state that educational entities will be required to "record the articulable and significant health and safety threat" that they believed justified in waiving normal FERPA protections. That granted leeway is not blanket but only if the situation is viewed as an emergency (Jaschik, 2007). But if colleges have leeway to disclose information in an emergency, that begs a new question; Who decides what's an emergency?

Jaschik (2007) contends that the idea is to find the right balance between student privacy and campus safety. FERPA is not a serious impediment to the sharing of information. It is just as important to maintain current FERPA policies, as it is to educate those on campus about the boundaries and application of its guidelines.

Handling Media and Public Relations

Campus public relations officials also have a very important job when dealing with emergencies. Learning to work with the media and creating effective media plans that carefully identify what the message should be and when it should be issued is pertinent. When and how much information should be communicated is also up for interpretation because you do not want to inadvertently send out information that may be premature. At the same time however, it is probably a good idea to always tell the truth.

Powell (2008), public relations officer at Elms College in Chicopee, Massachusetts, maintains that it is essential that the college's chief public relations Officer be part of any message that goes out to the general public.

The college's chief public relations officer must be given the opportunity to contribute his or her perspective. It's equally important for a PR officer to anticipate potential disasters and bring them to the attention of the president so that the college can weigh the risks consciously before making a decision.

(Powell, 2008)

Deborah Daley notes that first and foremost one of the most important tasks is finding the right medium for the message. Daley, Deborah. (Personal communication, March 1, 2009). "When a crisis happens, your regular job goes away," said Daley. "When dealing with a crisis, people want information more frequently. It is important to find the correct medium for the message and find multiple outlets, especially if email

doesn't work."

Daley also adds that it is important to keep the message in front of all internal constituents and external stakeholders. "During the crisis you must keep the message in front of them where they can easily see. Once we establish our message, I like to repeat it a minimum of six times to keep the message consistent and become a reliable source."

An effective media plan can also serve as a constant reminder that words matter and that the words selected during a crisis can create lasting consequences. Therefore the impact of what is spoken during and immediately following a crisis on campus can be very significant (Rinehart, 2007).

The institution's response over time can also leave a very profound impression on the community. During crisis colleges and universities are viewed through a microscope from the time a crisis hits. How an institution responds to a crisis can put a human face on the incident and demonstrate the college does care about the situation. Merriman (2008) notes that the perception of an institution's response to an event may negatively or positively affect the institution. She adds that this response can really put the three R's - reputation, retention and revenue - at stake.

Of course when the news is grim, it is important for the school to put human concerns before institutional ones. An institution that handles emergencies and manages the media correctly so as to leave a positive impression in the public mind can avoid a devastating stigma and long-term negative effects on future students, alumni, and donors.

How the Message is Interpreted

The message and how it is distributed is important but of course, what is most important is that the message is received, decoded, and acted on correctly. How the message is interpreted can make all the difference when alerting all key stakeholders regarding an emergency. If the message is interpreted correctly it can set off a chain of events that can send a widespread notice to all on campus. Interpreted incorrectly, or worse, not interpreted at all, the message loses all relevance and could result in disaster.

Some think that once a message is communicated it will be understood under all circumstances. This may not always be the case. It might be a bit unrealistic to assume that once all key stakeholders receive an alert they will understand it and then take appropriate self-protective action.

There are also other questions about how to best design and operate such a campus emergency messaging system. For example, at some institutions text messaging is the main communication while at others it is just one channel within a multi-channel strategy for campus alerting. Also, some schools like to use their emergency messaging for all campus notices rather than reserving it for a crisis situation.

At the University of Calgary in Canada they believe that a mass notification system ought to be reserved exclusively for critical or so-called short-fuse emergency incidents that require the campus community to be alerted widely and quickly. Conversely, Canada's Concordia University says emergency alerting should be a mandatory service that allows students to receive non-emergency notifications, such as class closures, bus schedules, administrative notices and registration deadlines, etc.

(Gow, Townsend, McGee, & Anderson, 2008)

There is a growing concern that emergency alert systems are being created too rapidly and deployed too quickly without the benefit of well-documented research. Some are wondering if schools are adequately considering all the factors necessary for a well-integrated emergency messaging system before pushing out a message as quickly as possible. Essentially, with each new crisis event, schools are quick to search out technological solutions and policy changes without the benefit of any empirical research to support their decision. Gow et al. (2008) believe that new systems are being developed and used so quickly today without the benefit of research into the human, policy, and legal factors that ultimately influence the effectiveness of emergency messaging technologies.

In the months after the Virginia Tech tragedy, hundreds of institutions across the country quickly signed contracts with vendors to help push alerts to students' cell phones in an emergency. The only problem with this is that institutions found a quick fix technology solution at the expense of developing a more comprehensive understanding of all factors. Post-secondary institutions and their vendors are expected to be able to quickly issue large numbers of text messages to the campus community during an emergency incident. Telecommunication providers on the other hand, are concerned that text-messaging channels will become congested during a mass notification campaign and are discouraging the use of this channel for short fuse alerting.

One other factor is getting the public to take emergencies seriously. Gow et al. (2008) talk about the concept of a normalcy bias in which individuals refuse to acknowledge the potential danger even when warned. They mention that people will

often ignore public warnings based on past experiences and their own perceptions of the levels of risk. A normalcy bias is a dangerous trait that really has school administrators concerned. Even if an alert is issued and understood it may not be acted on if the receiver does not either feel a level of trust in the information or completely understand the danger.

Crisis communication can be difficult material for humans to comprehend. Some have mentioned the need for a deep understanding of what can potentially happen that might make people more vigilant of crisis preparation. (Gow et al., 2008) One idea may be to develop a level of trust before any crisis ever occurs. School administrators can establish credibility and create a level of awareness so that when people hear or receive communication of a warning they can take appropriate action.

Another thought might be making people a part of the communication process and employing their help in telling the story of the developing crisis. Early research called *crisis informatics* has developed some of these preliminary ideas. Michael Byrne, senior advisor for emergency management and homeland security (2008) says that crisis informatics is an emerging field of study that is examining how to better utilize peer-to-peer (P2P) communication in times of crisis. Groups working with crisis informatics have said that emergency planners must now find ways to incorporate citizen activity and citizen-generated information in formal warning, response, and relief efforts. Some examples of this is happening at Purdue University where they are utilizing information from students who are uploading text and images to report crimes and other emergency situations (Purdue uses Facebook as part of emergency alert system, 2007).

With the expansion of digital cameras and photo-sharing websites, other schools

have also made use of sharing photos. Eyewitness photography can allow real-time documentation of events during times of crisis. By allowing people to publish documentary photography, schools are exploring new forms of P2P communication and allowing the public to play a critical role in crisis communication.

In the technology-driven society we live in, it seems like we are beginning to rely less on traditional media outlets and more on self-policing communities of information gatherers. Safety and security of today's campuses depends upon a better understanding of human response to warnings and the impact of new technologies on campus crisis management. People on today's campuses get their information in a variety of new ways and finding the quickest ways to disburse the information is not good enough anymore. Post-secondary institutions are growing aware of how the intended audience is getting their information. The key now is to find ways to communicate the crucial information so appropriate action is taken immediately which will be focus of the next chapter.

Chapter Six

The Future of Alert Communication

The current methods of communication are helping some institutions today alert their campuses but there are also a variety of technological advances coming from both schools and vendors that are creating new ways of alert.

One of the most advanced new forms of technology is geospatial mapping tools and global positioning systems (GPS) to locate exact points for safety and find best methods of evacuation. Some campuses are beginning to take advantage of geospatial mapping tools to locate specific points on campus and create visual representations of the landscape to record and plot where incidents occur. By using geospatial information, officials can layer traffic reports on top of location and weather data and gain a wider perspective on alerting the communities of trouble areas and evacuation efforts (Page, 2008).

Receiving text message alerts is just one way campuses are utilizing cell phones to help signal an emergency. Some schools and vendors are starting to incorporate the GPS-enabled devices in mobile phones to help monitor students who feel threatened or in a dangerous situation. Students who are walking on campus at night might want to activate the system to allow campus safety personnel to offer additional surveillance of their location. By pressing a panic button on their phone they would then alert officials of their exact location in an emergency situation (Page, 2008).

Some schools have also started incorporating digital signage and electronic displays into the emergency message communication. By integrating the emergency alert

into campus signage, schools have been able to coordinate a message to public and private video boards around campuses. At some schools, students, faculty, and staff have grown accustomed to glancing at the electronic message boards for quick campus updates, weather, and calendar information. By pushing an emergency message to the display, schools can quickly send alert communication to the most populous area of campus for public viewing.

At Wilberforce University in Ohio, officials have started experimenting with a new technology that will allow users to communicate back to campus administrators with their whereabouts and if they are in danger (Herrmann, 2008). During a crisis, users would be notified by a standard voice phone call, e-mail, or text message. After receiving the notification, they can respond back through their system called Account4Me by calling a toll-free number, e-mailing, texting, or going online to the Account4Me webpage to be accounted for. By clicking a button on the site it tells officials that they are safe. If in danger, they could press a "Contact Me" button to be connected to an emergency response commander for assistance. This is another excellent way of incorporating citizen activity as crisis informatics suggests.

After Katrina demolished campuses in the southern portion of the country, many campuses found new ways to get students and faculty together to complete scheduled courses. In an effort to avoid situations like this, some institutions have experimented with Second Life software that allows campuses to purchase land and build an entire campus in a virtual world. Students and faculty then participate in virtual classrooms and exchange ideas online and share ideas through self-created avatars to represent physical presence. They can capture lectures and perform assignments using podcasts and

Youtube functionality.

As new ideas begin to come forth from campuses hopefully so will new training and testing initiatives as well. All these forms of new technology have made communicating with their campus before, during, and after the crisis much easier but without adequate testing plans and training procedures, the intended effect can sometimes backfire (Nash, 2008). Using new technology can have significant advantages but without the proper training procedures and testing plans, campus leaders may be just as confused how to properly use it as the community trying to understand their purpose.

Conclusion from Research

The means of communicating emergency messages have become more and more challenging in recent years as faculty, students and staff proliferate away from the main campus. No longer can the president or dean summon the student body to meet in a grand hall to hear an important announcement. Most students today come and go on campus more frequently and school officials rarely know exactly who is on campus at a given time.

Although this research has discussed what can constitute a crisis, it is still up to the institution to determine if the crisis warrants mass alerts. Every college or university is different. Each has to decide what events pose risks to the well being of their populations. Once school officials come to an agreement about what significant risks they could face they can better define crisis. Once they define crisis they, in turn, can begin to develop a communication plan for alert.

Choosing the right emergency message system is the current hurdle school officials have to face. Equally as important, though, is keeping the message consistent across all spectrums. Many schools are beginning to use multiple outlets to distribute their message, which, on the surface, does seem like an excellent idea because it creates less of a chance of missing someone during an emergency. What is important, however, is making sure multiple experts are not relaying mixed messages. This study has demonstrated the importance of not only using multiple outlets to stream the communication but also properly ensuring the message is not demonstrating a hazard by confusing the community.

As documented, one of the many problems with voluntary alerts is the low participation rate. Getting a buy-in and persuading their communities to participate is the only way a mass notification system can succeed. The bright side is that there is some evidence showing that with time results are getting better. One example is at Princeton University. They started an emergency-notification system the first spring after the Virginia Tech shootings and the enrollment was extremely low. But when the next year's freshman class arrived on campus, nearly 90 percent had signed up as a result of more frequently testing and general awareness (Selingo, 2008).

The history of emergencies on campuses has warranted a more strategic plan that goes beyond mass notification when it comes to emergency communication. While even the best crisis plans might only get you past the first few hours, being prepared will help you communicate effectively any time. An essential part of developing a good alert communication plan starts with making sure institutions are ready. Planning for crisis is an effective way to manage the certainty that unexpected and unwanted things will

happen.

To take planning a step further, it is also important to include testing plans and training procedures in the preparations. Testing and training initiatives can make the staff aware of their roles, and the steps the institution plans to take during a crisis. Effective training can help facilitate getting the right personnel in the right location and continual testing plans can raise a level of comfort with the system.

Finally, it is important to remember that any form of communication has benefits and costs. Despite the overwhelming advantages that technology such as text messaging, email alerts and social networking notices provide, there are also opportunities for overuse, misinformation and the willingness of people to respond to the messages. No single communication answer will ever cover 100 percent of the intended target population. But by relying on multiple communication outlets, an institution can easily spread a message quickly throughout an entire campus. Walt Magnusen, director of telecommunications at Texas A&M, says that when choosing an emergency message system the key is “to not put your eggs in one basket” (Herrmann, 2008). I tend to agree; in fact the more communication methods an institution uses to send a simultaneous message, the more chance of keeping our student populations safe during crisis.

Chapter Seven

Reflection

My hope with this study was to examine the approaches colleges and universities are using today for emergency communication. I wanted to better understand the decision school officials are facing and explore the proactive approaches they are using to reach their broad and widespread audiences. I think this research accomplished all those key points.

Colleges today should never assume that a large-scale disaster situation would not happen at their institution. There are thousands of colleges and universities all of which have different cultural and institutional needs. Each needs to determine how their plans can be developed to demonstrate to their campus community that they are both comprehensive and caring.

Inevitably at some point, a crisis will happen at each institution and undoubtedly college administrators will make errors in judgments to not send an emergency message when they felt they should have. Some of these errors will be due to people not agreeing on when to send a message and some errors will be due to breakdown in communication among school officials. Some reasons may even be due to a school's effort to avoid negative press and thinking they have the situation under control. Whatever the reason, school administrators need to be aware of the ultimate goal of their emergency communication - to save the lives of their greatest asset, people. No matter how great a school's emergency communication model may be, if they do not make correct choices in the short timeframe before, during, and after the crisis, what good is their alert tool?

That said, I really do feel colleges and universities are beginning to emphasize the

importance of developing a mass notification strategy on their campus. Institutions of higher learning are finding that the more prepared they can be is benefiting how they communicate during crisis and helping the campus population feel more safe on their campuses.

It is fascinating to me the tremendous pressure campus leaders face even before a crisis begins. The parents of students are becoming more active and vocal in their concerns regarding campus safety and the welfare of their students. Parents want to know well ahead of time what preparations the institution is making to keep their son or daughter safe. Parent concerns are indeed self-serving and in constant conflict with school administrators interests for the entire institution. This persistent tension can make a university official's job very difficult when attempting to implement effective communication plans. However, as the research has indicated, many schools are taking steps to better involve parents and make them more aware of the process even as they take their first steps on campus. I would hope as we go forward parents would respect the job school officials have to do during crisis and continue to assist the process by educating their student to be more aware of emergency alerts.

Making preparations well ahead of time can obviously help everyone become more aware of disaster preparations and take crisis seriously. I found it interesting that schools, which are prone to disaster, have students develop plans of their own in preparation of catastrophic events. What a great idea to get families thinking about crisis before it even happens. When plans have been thought through well in advance, people remain more focused and there is a smaller chance of mass hysteria.

As part of these preparations, it is interesting that many schools are developing

partnerships for hosting technology solutions on various campuses. Collaboration between schools is a fantastic way to learn from other institutions and learn better ways to accomplish goals. These kinds of partnerships are great building blocks for opening other communication lines that can assist institutions during crisis.

Institutions of higher learning are always looking for teachable moments and things to build on, even in crisis. While it may be easy to notice the failures of a college or university after a crisis occurs it is equally as important to assess where a particular institution is strong and highlight those successes for future growth. Uncovering and building on strengths of an organization is a great way of securing buy-in and helping dispel negative forces and threats to change. If institutions can do a good job of highlighting their achievements, especially in avoiding crisis events, their stakeholders may feel better about their institutions readiness when an unanticipated disaster may indeed strike.

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