Colleges Weigh When to Alert Students of Danger

By ERIC HOOVER and SARA LIPKA

At the University of Chicago, the third Monday in November began with an hour of violence. Around 12:30 a.m., an assailant fired a shot at a staff member who was walking on the campus. At 1:15 a group of men robbed two female students on a nearby street. Just before 1:30, Amadou Cisse, a doctoral student, was shot and killed while walking to his apartment, a half block from the campus.

Minutes later, administrators discussed the situation by telephone. Like many colleges, Chicago has a new emergency-notification system, installed after the massacre at Virginia Tech last April. The system can quickly send short text and e-mail messages. But officials did not consider using it in the middle of the night, says Henry S. Webber, vice president for community and government affairs.

Instead the university first informed the campus of the murder at 10:40 a.m., in a detailed e-mail message. Some students believe that administrators waited too long. Security on Campus, a national crime-prevention group, says the university should have sent a warning minutes after learning of the murder.

Chicago officials say they held off because they were still gathering facts, and because police officers had determined that there was not a continuing threat to the campus.

"When you make these decisions," Mr. Webber says, "there are always judgment calls."

Nearly eight months after the shootings at Virginia Tech, colleges continue to grapple with questions about how — and when — to alert students to potential dangers. As more students and parents demand immediate information about crimes that occur on or near campuses, colleges must weigh the speed of responses against the quality of information.

"The complete focus now is on how fast can you communicate with your campus community," says Dolores A. Stafford, chief of police at George Washington University and a former president of the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators. "And the trouble is, sometimes you don't have anything to say."

The Meaning of 'Timely'

The Clery Act, the federal law that requires colleges and universities to disclose information about crimes on their campuses, was enacted in 1990, long before the era of text messages. The law does not require colleges to issue immediate alerts — only "timely warnings" of reported criminal offenses that present a continuing threat to students and employees. The Department of Education released a Clery Act handbook in 2005, but colleges still have little clarity as to what "timely" means.

Some, like George Washington, typically issue warnings within four to eight hours (in the form of e-mail messages and fliers) about robberies, arson, and serious assaults. Students might not learn of other crimes, such as a string of burglaries, until 36 hours after the first incident. In the meantime, police officers are investigating: interviewing victims and witnesses, for example, or reviewing surveillance video to develop a description of the suspect.

"It's just not as simple as people who don't have to do this believe it is," Ms. Stafford says.
The sophisticated emergency-notification systems that many colleges adopted after the shootings at Virginia Tech have, in some people's minds, conflated the meanings of timely warnings and near-instant alerts.

"In some cases," says Douglas F. Tuttle, another former president of the campus law-enforcement association, "people have jumped past the intent of the Clery law and have come to expect that whenever anything happens, like a robbery at the convenience store, you're going to text everybody and tell them about it."

Some lawmakers share that expectation. Richard J. Durbin and Barack Obama, the two Democratic U.S. senators from Illinois, introduced a bill shortly after the shootings at Virginia Tech that would require colleges to report any "law-enforcement emergency" within 30 minutes of discovering it. The bill is pending.

The Clery Act does not require colleges to send timely warnings about off-campus crimes, although it does include public property adjacent to college campuses. Alison Kiss, program director at Security on Campus, argues that the spirit of the law should have compelled Chicago officials to notify students immediately, even if the message contained only a few details.

"In 30 minutes or less," she says, "they should have at least put out a warning about the crime and location, especially when there was a suspect at large."

**Urgent Alerts**

Some colleges have emphasized speed. In November, Villanova University sent an alert to registered users of its new text-messaging system nine minutes after someone fired several shots in a campus parking lot at 2:30 a.m. The message urged students to lock their doors and move to a safe location, and said more information would follow. The university sent two follow-up messages before 8 a.m., finally informing students that the shooter had left the campus.

David G. Tedjeske, Villanova's director of public safety, says he was able to dash off the first message because a police officer had contacted him before arriving on the scene. "We knew all we really needed to know in the first 10 minutes," Mr. Tedjeske says. "It was an obvious alert."

This fall Delaware State University earned praise for its quick response to a shooting on the campus (*The Chronicle*, September 24). Police there received a call at 12:54 a.m. on a Friday and began posting fliers in residence halls — headlined "Timely Warning Notification" in large boldface — at 2:01 a.m. Meanwhile, resident assistants in the dormitories closest to the site of the shooting were knocking on students' doors.

The swift response was possible largely because the public-safety office was in charge, says James T. Overton, the university's chief of police. Student-affairs staff members initiated the door knocking, but Mr. Overton drafted the warning, which he ran by public-relations and legal-affairs officials. If they had not been available, he says, he would have issued the alert on his own.

"In other places, there are layers of bureaucracy you have to go through to put something out," Mr. Overton says. "Here it is left up to public safety." That makes the most sense, he says: "In terms of a criminal activity, we're the ones investigating, we have the most information, and we have the information firsthand."

Lacking guidelines on timeliness, he tries to announce basic information quickly and update it later. The "bare minimum," he says, is the date and time of the incident, what happened — as simple as "shooting" — and a tip, often simply to stay indoors.

The Delaware State police updated their initial warning about the shooting at least three times throughout the night, as more information became available. "If we learn more and the campus at large can benefit from it, then we put it out," says Mr. Overton. The police do withhold details that might compromise the criminal investigation.

**Value Over Speed**

Still, quick information is not always useful, some police chiefs say.

"We believe the better practice — rather than to say, 'Gotcha, we got it out in 27 minutes,' something that's useless —
is to put out a helpful alert," says James F. McShane, associate vice president for public safety at Columbia University.

If an e-mail message goes out in the middle of the night, students who are out or sleeping will not read it, he says. A text message may be faster, but it is too short to suggest more than to take shelter or flee, advice that in many situations may not be practical.

Technology raises expectations, but it also has its limits.

Eugene L. Zdziarski, assistant vice president for student affairs and dean of students at the University of Florida, says systems that can process no more than 2,000 messages per minute may not help a campus of 50,000 handle an emergency.

Besides, the information is only as good as the people who provide it. What matters, he says, is "not just informing them that something happened. It's telling them how to respond."

http://chronicle.com
Section: Students
Volume 54, Issue 15, Page A1
MISSION VIEJO – It was a Monday morning, and officials at Saddleback College had just tested their new emergency notification system, purchased in the wake of the April 16 campus massacre at Virginia Tech.

"We were joking that we hoped we would never have to use it," said Saddleback President Rich McCullough about the new system, which instantly turns every phone on campus into a warning loudspeaker.

Little did he know he would use the system that very afternoon – not about gunfire, but to inform people that the campus was closing due to smoke from the Santiago Canyon fires.

"It worked perfectly," McCullough said about the system, one of several new communication devices. "We also have systems where we can call all the students and we have marquees out front. The only people who didn't know were those on the bus, and I went out to the bus stop and waited for them myself so they could get right back on the bus."

Other local colleges also used new communications systems during the October fires, to alert students to closures and in some cases to tell them that campuses were open.

Fullerton College recently used its new notification system to tell students to go home, in the wake of a massive power outage on campus.

But the incident that sparked colleges to move toward new methods of campus communication was the Virginia Tech shooting, in which a deranged student shot and killed two students in a dorm room and then, two hours later, opened fire in a classroom building. Altogether, he killed 32 people and injured many more.
"A lot of things looked differently after Virginia Tech," said Rob Bachmann, director of the student health center at Orange Coast College, which is in the process of installing an alarm siren atop its new Watson Hall. "We looked around and said, "Are we prepared?"

Around the country, this was an unusually violent fall for colleges and universities.

One student was killed and another wounded in a shooting at Delaware State University, while a freshman at University of Arizona was arrested and accused of fatally stabbing her roommate. A student at Middle Tennessee State University was charged with attempted murder after he attacked a woman in his dorm room and the University of Wisconsin at Madison locked down several buildings after a man threatened to commit suicide or be killed by police.

Last week, Chapman University emailed its entire university community, after an off-campus incident in which a Chapman student was shot.

"We just wanted to alert the campus about the incident involving one of our students, that he was in the hospital and going to recover, and that the police department assessed no immediate threat to our campus," spokeswoman Mary Platt said.

Cal State Fullerton, the 1976 site of the second-worst campus massacre in U.S. history, when a gunman killed nine people in the campus library, now has an elaborate loudspeaker system, spokeswoman Paula Selleck said.

Shortly after the Virginia Tech incident, UC Irvine installed a new system that can send text messages to every student who signs up.

To date, 7,708 students among UCI's 27,000 students have voluntarily signed up for the program, which sends instant alerts to students in a crisis.

"Virginia Tech was a nudge for a lot of colleges," said Linda Bogue, UCI's emergency management coordinator. "This was on the radar, but it was speeded up.

Coast and North Orange County community college districts are also both exploring text messaging systems.

UCI is looking at other methods of alerting the campus in emergency situations, she said.

"We can send a message to over 100 "smart classrooms" (wired for technology) in the blink of an eye, a message appears on the instructor's podium," Bogue said. "We have marquee signs on campus. We have things as low-tech as police bullhorns."
All campuses are now using their Web sites as ways to communicate with students. During the recent fires, Orange County campuses posted information on their home pages about whether the campus was closed or open, and which events were canceled due to poor air quality.

Chapman, which was far from any fires, posted notices on its Web site to reassure parents far away who were concerned about their children's safety.

After Virginia Tech, University of California created a new security task force to evaluate how the system's nine campuses can improve their safety. A report is expected in January.

"They're looking at texting, reverse 911 systems, Web page banners," said UC spokeswoman Jennifer Ward. "One of the things they're looking at is using social networking sites like Facebook."

Contact the writer: 714-796-7994 or mfisher@ocregister.com