
Today's News

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After Virginia Tech, Campuses Rush to Add Alert Systems

By [ANDREA FOSTER](#)

Two colleges hit by violence within the past two weeks used new emergency-alert plans -- of different types -- to keep their communities safe.

The shooting and wounding of two students at Delaware State University on September 21 sent resident advisers knocking on dormitory-room doors in the middle of the night. Three days earlier, thousands of people at the University of Maryland at College Park received an alert on their cellphones warning them of a violent crime near a freshman dormitory.

"A carjacking occurred at Easton Hall at 8:48 p.m. this evening," read the Maryland text message, sent 50 minutes after the incident was reported. "The suspects were in a compact car with DC tags." One of the five criminals held a student and his girlfriend at gunpoint before he and an accomplice drove off in one of the victims' cars. The remaining criminals fled in their own car. The university police issued the alert to get help locating the suspects and to warn others on the campus to avoid the criminals.

Mindful of the massacre at Virginia Tech in April, colleges across the country are beefing up campus security. For many, the effort includes a plan to get word of an immediate safety threat on the campus out in minutes. Maryland is among hundreds of colleges that have signed contracts with vendors in the last six months to help push text and voice alerts to students' cellphones in an emergency. At Delaware State, the plan was multipronged, involving personal warnings and quickly printed posters.

While the cellphone alerts are promising because they can quickly reach students wherever they are, the technology usually involves voluntary participation, and students are reluctant to turn over cellphone numbers to campus officials. Realizing that technology can and often does fail, most colleges are combining high- and low-tech methods to advise people of what to do in a crisis.

Virginia Tech was criticized for failing to promptly warn students and others on the campus about the presence of a gunman after he murdered two students on April 16. A few hours later, he killed 30 people and wounded 17 more before killing himself.

For future emergencies, Virginia Tech has decided to use 3n, a Glendale, Calif., company that specializes in community alerts. The company uses a system that allows the university to send warnings to cellphones and via instant-messaging systems to people who have accounts with Yahoo, MSN, or America Online. Users can request to have the warnings delivered three different ways and can have their parents, spouses, and others off campus get them, too. Institutions have been flocking to these vendors. "Almost daily we're signing up another college or university," said Marc Ladin, vice president for global marketing at 3n. Another company, Omnilert LLC, in Leesburg, Va., boasted in July that more than 100 colleges had signed up for its e2Campus

text-messaging alert system.

Voluntary System

The emergency-alert services typically ask students and faculty and staff members to enter their contact information via a form on a college Web page. They are told that their telecommunications carriers may charge them for any incoming cellphone messages from the service but that the college will only issue alerts about perilous situations like natural disasters, terrorist attacks, or violent crimes.

Since cellphones accompany students everywhere, the services -- which typically work with any cellphone carrier -- seem to be a good way to push messages within minutes to the largest group of people on a campus. The services can be set up quickly and cost only a few dollars per student, which some colleges pass on to students. At Maryland, the service is provided through Roam Secure, in Arlington, Va., at a cost of \$60,000 for the first year. Each subsequent year is expected to cost between \$12,000 and \$13,000.

Vendors have the bandwidth to send thousands of outgoing calls at a time. And because the infrastructure for the alerts is off campus, floods, hurricanes, and other disasters that strike a college are unlikely to knock out the system.

But many colleges are finding that only a minority of the campus community provides personal contact information, and that they need a marketing campaign to promote the systems.

At Maryland only 8,000 people on the campus, or about a quarter of the population, have agreed to receive alerts since the system was inaugurated in May.

"We would prefer that more people sign up," said Paul Dillon, a spokesman for the university police. Drew University, in New Jersey, recently established an alert system through Connect-ED, which is operated by the NTI Group, of Sherman Oaks, Calif. As of mid-September, 27 percent of the 3,000 people on the campus had signed up for the service.

Mike Richichi, Drew's director of computing and network services, is hoping three-fourths of the campus population will participate.

Only 20 percent of the 35,000 people at Louisiana State University at Baton Rouge have signed up for an emergency text-messaging service through ClearTXT, in Cary, N.C. University officials have posted messages on the institution's Web site and manned a table in front of the student union to encourage students to participate.

Virginia Tech, where 54 percent of those on the campus have signed up for the service it calls VT Alerts, is taking a similar tack, posting "Have you signed up for VT Alerts?" on the home page of the college's Web site. Next to the message is a picture of a cellphone; users click on the message to get to participation instructions.

Colleges usually don't force students and others to provide their contact information, because vendors with access to the data are not bound by the same federal privacy laws that govern colleges.

Institutions have been more successful getting students to sign up when they have sent letters to parents about the importance of the emergency-notification systems.

The University of Connecticut sent such letters, and 14,000 out of 25,000 people, or 56 percent of those on the campus, provided their cellphone numbers, said Barry M. Feldman, vice president and chief operating officer for the university. Connecticut has also improved security by updating a 50-year-old siren system and installing phones dedicated to emergency calls around the campus.

Learning From Mistakes

Few colleges have actually used their emergency-alert systems. But those that have found they don't always work as planned or satisfy everyone.

The Diamondback, Maryland's student newspaper, criticized the university police for failing to send an emergency alert after several students were sexually assaulted near the campus this month. The crimes occurred only a few days before the carjacking. The suspects in that case are still at large.

Kevin Litten, editor in chief of *The Diamondback*, said the campus police appear to handle off-campus crimes against students with less urgency than those that occur on the campus.

But Mr. Dillon, the university-police spokesman, said the sexual assaults did not warrant cellphone alerts because one victim did not inform police of the attack until 16 hours after it occurred. "The danger was not ongoing or imminent," Mr. Dillon wrote in letter published in *The Diamondback*.

Rice University used its text- and voice-alert system for the first time in August when the tail end of tropical-storm Erin flooded the campus and surrounding streets, bringing traffic around Houston to a halt. The university sent out a cellphone message that within 30 minutes was received by 7,000 students and faculty and staff members. A second message went out to members of the community when the danger had passed. About 65 percent of people on the campus have signed up for the alerts, which are provided by MIR3 Intelligent Notification, based in San Diego.

But many people who received the alert hung up before listening to the whole message. Because the voice was computer-generated, they thought it was an advertisement, said Barry R. Ribbeck, Rice's director of systems architecture and infrastructure. The university has since decided to use an announcement recorded by a person rather than a computer, and to send the message from a phone number that people will recognize as university affiliated.

Rice officials discovered during a recent trial run of the alert system that about 400 people on the campus didn't receive a test message because they were using their cellphones and their voice mail did not kick in. The university is investigating the cause.

"We continue to refine it as we learn more about it," Kamran Khan, Rice's vice provost for information technology, said about the alert system.

The Rice police also warned people of the flooding by blocking roads leading to the campus.

Indeed, low-tech solutions are often highly effective. Though questions have arisen at Delaware State because police had questioned the suspected shooter and then released him, authorities are still applauded for keeping students secure after the crime. Going door to door minutes after the shootings worked well in keeping Delaware State students inside their dormitory rooms, according to S. Daniel Carter, senior vice president of Security on Campus, a Pennsylvania group that monitors campus violence. Still, the university lost no time after the shootings in talking to vendors of cellphone notification services.

Texting, Facebook Used to Alert Students

By VERENA DOBNIK and RYAN J. FOLEY – 18 hours ago

NEW YORK (AP) — When a masked freshman came to campus at St. John's University with what police said was a loaded rifle sticking out of a bag, the school alerted students via cell-phone text messages within 18 minutes.

And when a suicidal gunman was reported to be on the loose at the University of Wisconsin, the school sent out mass e-mails and took out an ad on Facebook to warn students.

As the school year starts, colleges around the country are applying the lessons of Virginia Tech and using high technology to get the word out fast in a crisis.

"This was certainly a surprise. No one thought that we would be testing this latest technology this quickly for an emergency," said James Pellow, executive vice president of St. John's.

The 20,000-student Roman Catholic school in Queens activated its new text messaging system just three weeks ago. The scare came on the same day that the student paper ran a front-page story on the system, under the blaring headline: "In case of emergency."

This week's incidents at St. John's and UW-Madison — both of which ended without bloodshed — underscore how campus security has changed since Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 people on the Virginia Tech campus in April.

Cho shot his first two victims just after 7 a.m. More than two hours later, he massacred 30 people in a classroom building across campus. It was not until 9:26 a.m. that the school sent the first e-mail to students and faculty. An investigative panel concluded that lives could have been saved if alerts had been sent out earlier and classes canceled after the first burst of gunfire.

Since then, hundreds of schools administrations have installed text-messaging systems to communicate with students.

Omnilert, a company based in Leesburg, Va., saw its business surge after the Virginia Tech rampage. It is now supplying more than 250 colleges and universities around the country with instant messaging capability — a system called e2Campus.

St. John's purchased its inCampuAlert text-messaging system from a California company called MIR3 Inc. over the summer, also in response to the Virginia Tech slayings.

The system sends a message not only to cell phones, but also to digital signs in public places like student unions or dorms, as well as to computers, PDAs and beepers.

"Nearly every major college and university in the country is either in the process of implementing a text message warning system or seriously considering do it," said S. Daniel Carter, senior vice president of Security on Campus, a nonprofit organization based in King of Prussia, Pa., that pushes for safer college campuses.

School officials have not completely given up more traditional ways of communicating with students.

Last week, after two students were shot and wounded at Delaware State University, campus police and residence hall advisers knocked on doors and told students to stay in their rooms, and warnings were posted on the school's Web site and at dorms.

But it is clear that schools are taking advantage of every innovation they can.

In Wisconsin, officials paid the popular social networking site Facebook \$100 to post a flier on the UW-Madison social network. The ad asked users to click on a link for an update on the campus emergency. That took them to the university's home page, which carried the latest information on the search for a suicidal gunman. Authorities still had not located the man as of Thursday.

In the St. John's incident, text messages were sent so quickly that a student who helped subdue the suspect felt his cell phone vibrate with the information while he was restraining the gunman.

The message to student read: "From Public Safety. Male was found on campus with rifle. Please stay in your buildings until further notice. He is in custody, but please wait until the all clear."

The text messaging "worked like a charm," New York City Police Commissioner Raymond Kelly said a day later at a ceremony to honor the student, a police cadet, who helped restrain the suspect. "Young people today are incredibly wired, and administrators have the technology at their fingertips — once they put it in place," said Amanda Lenhart, a researcher for the Pew Internet and American Life Project, a Washington-based nonprofit organization.

More than 70 percent of 18- to 29-year-olds own a cell phone, and 92 percent of them text message, according to a 2006 Pew survey.

"What better way is there to get in contact with people who always carry technology, or are within shouting distance of it?" Lenhart said. "This is a huge development in terms of school security."
