Gordon
College

Location: Wenham, Massachusetts
Campus Type: Suburban
Enrollment: Approx. 2,000
Faculty/Staff: 630
Campus Size: 450 acres
Number of buildings: 37

When an emergency situation strikes a college or university, school safety personnel must react quickly to provide potentially life-saving information to thousands of students, faculty, and staff spread across campus. Campuses will often utilize several different mass communication systems to send alerts via email, text messages, phone, pop-up desktop notifications, digital signage override, and more.

The Challenge

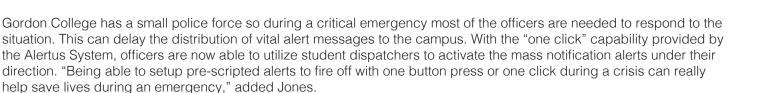However, can deploying multiple alert systems be a hindrance when an emergency situation occurs?

"During a crisis, you don't have time to go down a checklist of all the systems you need to activate," said Chris Jones, Associate Vice President of Technology and Operations for Gordon College. "We had multiple emergency notification systems and the list to activate all of them was daunting, even when the pressure of an emergency was not on."

Gordon College's list of emergency notification systems included: a system to notify by text, email, and phone; a system to post banner messages that required logging into two separate websites; and a digital signage system that also required users to log in to activate the messages. Also, the systems were operated separately by the campus police and IT departments, potentially creating confusion of which systems to activate during an emergency.

The Need for Unification

Jones recognized the need to unify the school's emergency notification efforts by better aligning the campus police and IT departments and creating a more cohesive mass notification system. "I've gained more oversight of both the campus police

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and IT departments, and it has been a huge advantage because I have been able to get these departments working more closely together," explained Jones. "However, when it came to unified mass notification I didn't know what was possible until I saw the Alertus Emergency Notification System at a trade show. In looking at Alertus, it was the way to unify all of our systems." Alertus' innovative mass notification system makes unification possible by leveraging existing infrastructure and IT assets to seamlessly integrate disparate and legacy systems while also providing a single point of activation. "Now with 'one click' we can activate all of the school's mass communications systems (phone, email, text, website updates, and digital signage) at once," said Jones.

Gordon College has a small police force so during a critical emergency most of the officers are needed to respond to the situation. This can delay the distribution of vital alert messages to the campus. With the "one click" capability provided by the Alertus System, officers are now able to utilize student dispatchers to activate the mass notification alerts under their direction. "Being able to setup pre-scripted alerts to fire off with one button press or one click during a crisis can really help save lives during an emergency," added Jones.

Unified and Flexible

While the Alertus System allowed Jones to bring all of the school's notification systems together as one unified system, he still has the flexibility of activating the multiple systems separately. "I am not a fan of putting all your eggs in one basket, so I actually like having multiple systems," explained Jones. "I've been through situations where the lone notification system has gone down, and you look around saying 'now what?'"

Alertus Desktop™ Notification can deliver a facility-wide emergency notification in a matter of seconds.

Jones faced this "now what" scenario when a severe windstorm knocked out power on campus. Making matters worse, the storm blew down a large tree that took out a telephone pole causing even the cell towers to lose service. This created great difficulty in communicating with the campus during the power outage as the school was reliant on cell phones to reach students and faculty with text and email alert messaging. "This really showed us we need that multi-module mass notification system through several systems to get the word out," said Jones.

"One of the best things about Alertus is that it is modular so I can deploy little bits at a time," explained Jones."We do not have a large budget at Gordon College, so I am adding Alertus components as funds become available." Due to the school's small budget, Jones was only able to first start implementing solutions from Alertus by taking advantage of the Alertus Desktop™ Donation Initiative. The philanthropic program offers the Alertus Desktop™ Notification tool at no cost to schools that may have limited resources to bolster their emergency notification system. The grant allowed Jones to install the desktop notification on all school-owned computers.

Jones has since added more than 20 Alertus Alert Beacons®—wall-mounted devices that can be installed almost anywhere, produce attention-grabbing bright flashes and loud sounds, and display a custom message about the nature of the emergency and how to respond—and Alertus text-to-speech self-amplified speakers in the science center PA system to provide text-to-speech capabilities. "I'm very excited to install the text-to-speech system in our science center," said Jones. "I want to add this to other buildings where the fire alarm system will support it."

The wall-mounted Alertus Alert Beacon® sounds, flashes, and displays an alert message in the event of an emergency.

Ready if the Time Comes

Fortunately, the school has not had to activate the Alertus System for a major emergency. Jones and his team perform daily, monthly, and yearly tests of various parts of the system and there has not been a single failure. "The Alertus System has been 100 percent stable," proclaimed Jones.

Next Steps

While Jones feels the school's emergency notification efforts are vastly improved, he will continue to expand the Alertus System as funds become available. Eventually, he wants to deploy an outdoor siren and PA system to provide mass notification for outdoor spaces. "I see this as a key piece that is needed for our system," concluded Jones.