

When Hurricane Rita swept through the Lamar University (LU) campus in 2005, the university relied on web site postings to communicate critical safety and evacuation information to students, staff, and faculty. Only those who had web access at their evacuation location, however, could obtain the information, and the university soon realized they needed a more reliable, efficient way to communicate during emergencies. When Hurricanes Humberto and Ike threatened the campus in 2007 and 2008, respectively, LU officials turned instead to the Blackboard Connect notification service to keep their campus community safe, prepared, and informed. The study below illustrates why Lamar University officials now call the Blackboard Connect service “the center of our campus communication plan.”

## **CHALLENGE:** Finding a more reliable and efficient means of communication during severe weather events

Located in Beaumont, Texas, 40 miles from the Gulf Coast, Lamar University serves over 13,000 students and approximately 2,000 faculty and staff. Known for its engineering and nursing programs, as well as its small class sizes, the university manages five academic colleges and offers a wide variety of undergraduate, masters, and doctoral degree programs. While originally founded as a junior college in 1921, the university was designated a four-year, state-supported institution in 1951, the first junior college in Texas to make such a transition.

The university’s proximity to “hurricane alley” means that the campus must be prepared to evacuate college grounds on short notice—and safe, orderly evacuations rely heavily on the provision of consistent, reliable communication. When Hurricane Rita hit the university in 2005, however, communicating with students, faculty, and staff proved problematic. “During Hurricane Rita, our campus was



## LAMAR UNIVERSITY

closed for almost a month,” said John Genuardi, director of customer support services. “We had a lot of information that we needed to share with the campus community. We posted information to an emergency web site, but it just didn’t get enough information to people, as only those who had web access at their evacuation location could get the information.”

### Quick Facts

- ) Located 40 miles from the Gulf Coast
- ) More than 13,000 students
- ) Used the Blackboard Connect service to keep campus safe during Hurricanes Humberto and Ike
- ) During Hurricane Ike made 14 different calls to 235,860 numbers



## **SOLUTION:** University selects the Blackboard Connect Service

In the wake of Hurricane Rita, LU officials recognized the need for a dependable communication system that would enable them to keep their campus community informed at all times, from any location, in all situations. "As a commuter school located near the Gulf Coast, we knew we needed a reliable way to communicate with everyone—students, faculty, and staff—during a hurricane." Genuardi said.

The university selected Blackboard Connect in September 2007. The service would not only allow the university to communicate in minutes with thousands of stakeholders, but would allow such communication from a remote location, critical when evacuations limit access to local facilities and infrastructures. When Hurricane Humberto hit southeast Texas in 2007—followed by Ike one year later—the university realized a better solution was a necessity.

## **RESULT:** Staff and students stay safe through constant communication and hurricane updates

Hurricane Humberto developed in the northwestern Gulf of Mexico on September 12, 2007, and struck southeast Texas early on September 13 with heavy rainfall, intense thunderstorms, and winds approaching 90 mph. While damage from the hurricane forced the university to close for three days, officials were able to stay in constant contact with students and staff via voice, e-mail, and SMS text messaging. According to Michael Dobe, associate vice president and chief information officer, "With Blackboard Connect, we were able to push information to people and keep them informed before, during, and after the storm."

Hurricane Ike hit the campus almost one year later. Between August 29 and September 24, 2008, LU sent a total of fourteen different calls to 235,860 individual numbers. "Hurricane Ike went from a tropical storm to a hurricane almost overnight," shared Genuardi. "It was incredibly beneficial to be able to immediately pass on

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Dr. James Simmons  
*President*  
*Lamar University*

safety and campus closure information via the Blackboard Connect system. The ability to send a message from any location was critical to the university's ability to manage the flow of information and safety concerns."

The Blackboard Connect service is now viewed as an integral part of Lamar University's campus safety plan and has significantly enhanced the university's stormemergency preparedness. Using the Blackboard Connect service through two hurricanes has given the university an efficient, cost-effective way to stay in contact with faculty, staff, and students—regardless of individual locations. "Being on the Gulf Coast means we must be prepared to evacuate the campus in the event of a hurricane...Blackboard Connect is the absolute best way for us to stay in contact with faculty, staff and students who have traveled to safe havens to wait out a storm," Dr. James Simmons, president of LU, stated. "Without the capabilities of this service, our abilities to reach our faculty, staff and students with information vital to their safety would be significantly limited."

