

Blackboard & Northwestern University

UNIVERSITY USES BLACKBOARD CONNECT TO WARN STUDENTS OF MAN WITH A GUN ON CAMPUS

When a man with a gun was seen in a campus building elevator, Northwestern University administrators used the Blackboard Connect service to warn stakeholders of the danger. Within the hour, more than 17,000 students and 5,000 faculty and staff on multiple campuses received details about the threat and information on potentially life-saving safety protocols. According to Alan Cubbage, Vice President for University Relations, "In the wake of the Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois incidents, it is expected that universities will have the ability to communicate quickly with internal audiences, and they need to be able to do it in an urgent situation. Blackboard Connect allows us to do so in a timely manner. It has been a valuable addition to our emergency communications systems."

CHALLENGE:

Quickly Informing the Students and Faculty of a Dangerous Situation

A private research institution, Northwestern University serves approximately 19,000 students: 8,500 full-time undergraduates, 7,900 full-time graduate students, and 2,500 part-time students. The main campuses are located in Evanston and Chicago, Illinois, with a branch campus in Doha, Qatar.

On a January morning, University Police were notified that a man with a gun had been seen in a campus building elevator. The 12-story building on Northwestern's Chicago campus includes classrooms and offices for the School of Law, the law library and offices for Northwestern's Feinberg School of Medicine. After the threat was deemed credible, University Police began searching the building and adjoining buildings while University Relations, the university's communications office immediately began informing students, faculty and staff of the potential danger. Most important was ensuring that constituents

QUICK FACTS

- ▶ Enrollment: 19,000
- ▶ Three campuses located in Evanston and Chicago, Illinois and Doha, Qatar
- ▶ Used the Blackboard Connect service to warn constituents when a man with a gun was seen on campus

had the opportunity to either take onsite safety precautions or avoid the area altogether. “In a crisis, we have the challenge of trying to reach our constituents all over the Chicago metropolitan area, regardless of the time of day. And the Chicago metropolitan area is a big space,” said Cabbage. “During this incident we wanted to inform the entire campus community. The campuses are only 12 miles apart, and there are shuttle buses going back and forth between campuses at all times.”

SOLUTION:

The Blackboard Connect Service

Prior to implementing the Blackboard Connect platform, the university had relied on internal email systems to deliver emergency messages—with unreliable results. “It sometimes would take several hours for an email to cycle through our internal system,” said Cabbage. “To send an urgent email and know it’s not going to reach your audience for another three hours means that system is not useful in a crisis situation. Blackboard Connect allows us to communicate with our constituencies on a much more timely basis.”

At 10:25 am, administrators used the Blackboard Connect service to warn students, faculty and staff about the reported sighting of a man with a gun. The message, which was sent via e-mail, text message and phone calls, included a summary of the incident, a description of the suspect, suggested safety protocols and information on law enforcement efforts. Updates were sent at 11:15 am and 12:50 pm,

and at 1:30 pm, students, faculty, and staff received an all-clear message. The gunman was not seen again, and no one was injured during the incident.

RESULT:

The Students and Faculty Were Kept Safe and Constantly Updated

Overall, administrators used the Blackboard Connect service to send four messages in three hours to almost 45,000 people. The service was so effective at reaching all constituents in a timely manner that, post-incident, the decision was made to eliminate use of the university’s own email system in future crises. “During the incident, our internal emails bogged down our internal email servers,” said Cabbage. “In the future, we’ll be relying on Blackboard Connect to deliver text, email, and phone messages.”

The Blackboard Connect service is a critical component in the university’s commitment to functioning as the primary source of reliable information for campus constituents. “The reality is that we can’t deliver information as fast as somebody at the scene who takes a picture with a cell phone and then emails it. Cell phones, Twitter feeds, Facebook postings and other unofficial networks can spread information more quickly than any institution because we have the need to make sure the information is accurate before we disseminate it. So we want students to rely on us for information that is credible, but still delivered quickly. A system like Blackboard Connect makes this kind of information distribution possible.”

The service also helps the university meet student expectations regarding rapid communication. According to Cabbage, “Students today are always connected, and there is an expectation that information will be delivered instantaneously. With Blackboard Connect, we can provide information on a very timely basis.” These same expectations have also been beneficial in gaining student buy-in regarding the service. Northwestern makes participation in the service mandatory—and hasn’t received any complaints.” You can’t register for classes until you give us an emergency notification number. We’ve had zero pushback from students on this. We’ve found that students want to hear from us in an crisis.”



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Alan Cabbage
Vice President for University Relations

