

Reliability trumps economy in an emergency

Cost is often a determining factor in the selection of a notification service, and in times of economic uncertainty, a less expensive service may seem more attractive—at least initially. But in an emergency, a service’s reliability—or lack thereof—quickly trumps any economic concerns. For Portland State University (PSU), selecting a cheaper provider resulted in extraordinarily long delivery times and a difficult, often slow user interface. When PSU switched to the Blackboard Connect service, message delivery times went from two and a half hours to two minutes—a dramatic increase in delivery speed. According to Sharon Blanton, Portland State’s CIO, “I just feel more confident using the Blackboard Connect system than our previous service. I don’t feel like I’m going to have to cross my fingers after I send an actual emergency message. That’s huge.”

CHALLENGE: Slow deliveries mean mixed messages

Located in the southern end of downtown Portland, Portland State University (PSU) is the largest university in Oregon and serves 28,000 students with more than 120 majors. The only urban university in the state, PSU is also unique in that the campus lacks traditional boundaries: in any given block, PSU buildings share street space with a variety of downtown businesses, including retail shops and government offices.

For any university, the ability to rapidly notify students, faculty, and staff during an emergency is a critical component in the provision of safety and security. For PSU, reaching stakeholders was even more challenging: the nature of the university’s urban campus meant that traditional notification methods had limited effectiveness. To address the need for comprehensive emergency communication capabilities, the university decided to implement a notification service. While the search for a provider yielded numerous options, for CIO Sharon Blanton, the Blackboard Connect platform was the obvious front runner. The university’s budget, however, proved to be a limiting factor. “Blackboard Connect was my top choice,” said Blanton. “But it was outside our budget at the time, so we went with the runner up.”

Quick Facts

-) Urban campus located in Portland, Oregon
-) Enrollment: 28,000
-) After switching to the Blackboard Connect platform, message delivery times went from two and a half hours to *two minutes*



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*Chief Information Officer
Portland State University*

Challenges with their initial choice arose from day one. Delayed messaging and a slow, difficult user interface quickly eroded administrator confidence. “With our first provider, it was taking two to two and a half hours for everybody to get messages,” said Blanton. Delivery delays often resulted in follow-up messages that arrived ahead of the original notifications. “People were getting mixed messages. Some people were getting the threat message at the same time that others were getting the ‘all clear’ message. Or some people would get an ‘all clear’ message and then hours later receive the threat message. We had a lot of confusion.” User interface challenges only compounded the problem. According to Blanton, “The system wouldn’t respond to our commands. After launching a message, the interface would become very slow. We would click on something to get a report and

sometimes would have to wait 10 or 15 minutes to get a response. You just can’t have that when you’re in an emergency situation.”

SOLUTION: The Blackboard Connect Service

PSU suffered the service’s limited capacity—and delayed messaging—for almost a year. The opportunity to switch services finally came in August 2009, when the Oregon University System engaged in the conversation.

“Fortunately for us, the entire university system put a committee together and issued an RFP for a system-wide solution for emergency communication,” said Blanton. “I was asked to serve on that committee, and we selected the Blackboard Connect service. I felt the service was going to be far superior to that which we were getting with our current provider.”

RESULT: Leaders Able to Connect to Students, Faculty and Staff

The university’s first test of the Blackboard Connect platform confirmed the decision to switch providers. What had previously taken two hours—reaching thousands of students, faculty, and staff via multimodal messaging—took two minutes using the Blackboard Connect service. “Most people received the test call within a minute of it being sent, which was just phenomenal compared to our previous experience,” said Blanton. “People got the messages in all of the modes they had signed up for—everything went flawlessly. It went very, very quickly.”

The service’s easy-to-use interface and responsive customer service were added boons. “The Blackboard Connect interface is so much easier to understand. It’s much more intuitive,” said Blanton. “Customer service, too, has been great. We call our customer service contact and she’s just there. You don’t have to go through this big phone tree of ‘press 1 if you want to talk to a human being, press 2 if you just want to walk away angry.’ The response time has been really fast.”

While PSU administrators were pleased by the delivery speed and reliability of the Blackboard Connect platform, the response from students who received the test message was also unexpectedly positive.

"After the test message, the students wrote an article about it in their paper," said Blanton. "Most of the time if we want something to get in the paper, we have to request that they write about it. But this was something they went and did on their own. They were very positive."

The unlimited messaging that comes as part of the Blackboard Connect offering has encouraged PSU administrators to expand their thinking about notification and its applications. "With our previous provider, by contract we were only allowed to use the service for emergencies. So we were very careful about using it. We were very careful about even about testing it, because we didn't want to get in trouble for using it too much," said Blanton. "We're now realizing we have this great toolset, and we could be making use of it in other ways. As we consider ways to expand usage, we're starting to ask 'why aren't we using Blackboard Connect for this?'" Changing this "limited usage" mindset has resulted in consideration for new, creative uses for the system, including sending Blackboard Connect messages to pertinent staff during IT emergencies. "Nobody's going to die from an IT emergency, but it's still important that we reach people. Often, staff are not reading email when a problem occurs, or the problem could prevent us from sending email. There are certain key people we'd like to reach quickly by phone or text."

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Blanton now frequently recommends the Blackboard Connect service to other universities that are considering using a notification service. "I don't care who you are, when there's an emergency and the VP or president calls you and says 'send the message,' you get freaked out. It just happens, you get a little panicky, and it's too easy to make mistakes. When I use Blackboard Connect, I don't have to mess around to try and figure out how to do something. I know that I can get in there and get to the message and send it very, very quickly."

