Multimodal Communications Strategy Key to Emergency Planning

When a fire in a utility tunnel damaged telecommunications fiber and cut off communications for 36 campus buildings, the University of Notre Dame used the Blackboard Connect™ service to reach students, faculty, and staff with emergency messaging. The University was able to quickly send 11 separate messages to a variety of target groups, including the University’s Emergency Operations Center’s leadership. According to Jay Steed, Executive Assistant to the CIO, “We’ve developed a comprehensive communications strategy and Blackboard Connect is one of those protocols. For us, the service is a vital tool in support of our broader emergency plan... It’s an extremely useful service in an emergency situation.”

**CHALLENGE:** Fire Disrupts Phone lines and Internet Connectivity When Campus Evacuation Needed

Located in South Bend, Indiana, 90 miles east of Chicago, the University of Notre Dame (ND) serves more than 11,700 students, 8,363 of whom are undergraduates. Well known for the quality of both its teaching and research, the University has been rated among the nation’s top 25 institutions of higher learning in numerous surveys. In addition to a rigorous academic program, ND is widely known for its commitment to community service: some 80 percent of its students participate in local, national and global service initiatives while attending the University.

On the morning of Friday, August 28, 2009, a fire in a utility tunnel under the Notre Dame campus severely damaged a large amount of telecommunications fiber. Smoke filtered into several campus buildings, forcing classroom and residence hall evacuations, and the University quickly lost partial internet connectivity, PA, landline, and cellular service. HVAC systems also became inoperable in approximately a third of campus buildings. According to Steed, “We’re just fortunate it wasn’t a home football weekend, as we would have had an additional 100,000 people on campus. As it was, we still had hundreds of people evacuated from classrooms and buildings—and a severely damaged communications infrastructure during the first week of fall classes.”
SOLUTION: The Blackboard Connect Service

The Blackboard Connect service has been an important part of Notre Dame’s comprehensive emergency notification plan since May of 2007. The University has worked to effectively brand the notification service, ND Alert, integrating it into student, staff, and faculty awareness. Since inception, the service has been used for emergencies only. “When our registrar asks for cell phone numbers, students are assured that the numbers will only be used in case of an emergency,” said Steed. As result, the University has a high “opt-in” rate among students and can quickly send messages to a majority of the campus population during an emergency.

As the event progressed throughout the morning—and various communications protocols continued to experience disruption—Notre Dame turned to Blackboard Connect to facilitate emergency messaging. “For 36 of our buildings, we lost internet and landline functionality. Cellular capabilities—voice and text—remained as the best methods to communicate widely with the campus.” said Steed. In total, University officials sent out 11 notifications via the Blackboard Connect platform. The university relied on the service for a variety of messages, from activating the Emergency Operations Center, to alerting students, faculty, and staff away from areas of possible danger. Activation of the EOC is a step critical to campus emergency management and mitigation. The EOC team is responsible for both liaising with first responders and coordinating communication with campus departments and administration. Blackboard Connect was also employed as part of the University’s recovery effort. As the focus shifted to restoration, phone messages were sent to notify students that residence halls and campus buildings were safe to occupy.

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University of Notre Dame

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

By 1:30 pm, the University EOC had been deactivated. Campus-wide communication capabilities, however, would not be fully functional until Monday, August 31. Preparedness played a large role in the University’s deft handling of the crisis and, while the fire may have created multiple inconveniences, no one was seriously hurt and only one person received emergency treatment. “We have a crisis preparedness emergency response plan, and we’ve done formal, tabletop exercises to run through our emergency procedures,” said Steed. “Because we had practiced, we already knew how we were going to use the Blackboard Connect service during the fire emergency, and we were able to utilize the service when internet connectivity was disrupted.”

The University’s commitment to a multimodal emergency communications plan was integral to the effective management of the emergency. As various communication channels failed, leaders were still able to connect with students, faculty, and staff via the Blackboard Connect service. According to Steed, “We’ve developed a comprehensive communications strategy, and Blackboard Connect is one of those protocols,” Steed said. “For us, the service is a vital tool in support of our broader emergency plan.” The Blackboard Connect platform’s redundancy measures and multiple servers—located across the nation—also play a critical role in the University’s emergency preparedness. “We continue to review the latest and greatest technologies. One of the key things we’ve noted about the Blackboard Connect service is its availability across geographic regions. During a campus emergency, this kind of redundancy is critical. The service really is an extremely useful tool in a time of need. We’re very confident with it and pleased with the results.”