Facebook and Twitter are attracting more users every day—in fact 72% of young adults use social network sites according to a Pew Internet study in 2010. That growing audience is one reason social media is quickly becoming a mainstream platform for university leaders looking to establish relationships and maintain open conversations with the campus community.

At the same time, higher education institutions have made significant investments in mass notification platforms, which disseminate important time-sensitive information. And they’re wondering how to integrate these authoritative, one-to-many communications into the more conversational nature of the social space.

There are many benefits to incorporating social media into your campus communications plan, from reaching larger audiences to building a sense of community on campus, communicating instantaneously, and initiating and engaging proactive interaction with students, faculty and staff. Blackboard is finding that social media integration is creating a new era in administration-to-campus communication, one that engages students and fosters a better administration for all.
The Evolution of Administration-to-Campus Mass Communication in the 21st Century

The avenues colleges and universities have for communicating with the campus community have changed dramatically in recent years. Beginning with campus siren systems and radio alerts decades ago, emergency communications have evolved to include automated telephone calls, e-mails, text messages, and social media. This significant evolution in communication methods has had several benefits:

- With more direct channels of communication, colleges and universities have been able to increase safety and security on campus with specific, near real-time updates that keep the campus community better informed on urgent matters — including imminent severe weather, fires, road closures, evacuation routes, disaster preparedness, and relief services.
- Since the campus is better informed, students and employees are less likely to endanger themselves in the event of an emergency.
- Colleges and universities are more proactive and better able to build a sense of community and strong relationships with campus members through enrollment management, alumni outreach, and student engagement communications.
- These newer methods of communications are relatively low-cost, allowing colleges and universities to enhance service to students, faculty and staff even during challenging economic times.

The communications landscape continues to evolve rapidly and the need for time-sensitive mass communication has never been greater. In today’s instantaneous world, institutions must stay vigilant in meeting the expectations of a tech-savvy student and employee population to keep pace with the proliferation of new communication channels. A range of new social media tools and platforms are already having a positive effect on the way universities and students connect and interact.
The Emergence of Social Media

As we have discussed, social media is becoming a regular part of every day communications and provides a new channel for colleges and universities to reach their campus community. Facebook is now used by approximately 500 million people and Twitter by approximately 16.4 million people—many of whom are young adults. This presents a promising opportunity to instantly update your community with targeted messages through an additional channel that they check frequently. As further evidence of this new channel’s impact on a mass notification strategy, Emergency Management magazine’s, Alerts & Notifications blog listed “growth in the use of social media” among its top ten trends for 2010.

People are also relying more and more on mobile devices as their primary communication tool and increasingly using these devices to access social networking sites. A June 2010 comScore report found that 14.5 million people accessed a social networking application from a mobile device, up 240 percent from the prior year. “Social networking is by far the fastest-growing mobile activity right now,” said Mark Donovan, comScore’s Senior Vice President of Mobile. “Twenty percent of mobile users are now accessing social networking sites via their phone.”

Using social media tools effectively requires some specialized knowledge in terms of messaging formats, styles, and limitations depending on the platform. But these tools can be quickly mastered, and when used in combination with other channels, provide a high-impact way to deliver important information quickly anytime, anywhere.

Facebook, Twitter and other social media platforms are helping colleges and universities:

- Get their message in front of the campus community. Students and more tech-savvy staff and educators are increasingly relying on their mobile devices and social media tools to stay in touch and informed. 16.7% of young adults aged 18-24 use a smartphone according to a comScore February 2011 report. They were also 55 percent more likely to access mobile media than an average mobile user.

- Build community confidence in the institution. The immediacy and accessibility of social media allows colleges and universities to demonstrate control during urgent situations and disseminate accurate, relevant information to dispel rumors that tend to proliferate when information is lacking.

- Communicate instantaneously. The Internet and social media technology provide campus security managers and Public Information Officers (PIOs) with unprecedented opportunities to interact quickly and directly with thousands of people.

- Create an information exchange. Colleges and universities are finding social media tools can build relationships with students and create new opportunities to communicate different kinds of information.

A MULTI-CHANNEL APPROACH TO ADMINISTRATION-TO-CAMPUS COMMUNICATIONS:

- Keeps the campus community better informed
- Fosters proactive outreach and interaction
- Enhances service with minimal cost
Opening the Door to Broader Communications

Utilizing social media channels opens up the door to more effective and different kinds of communications between institutions and students. For example, institutions can:

- More effectively engage alumni with mass notification and social media. “You’ll hear some alumnus, or even admissions offices, saying ‘Well, we reach students and our young alumni through Facebook...’ or this, that, and the other,” says Mary Kay Cooper, Alumni Relations Director at Trinity College in Texas. “But I recommend that schools use Blackboard Connect in partnership with other outreach methods. We put our events on Facebook, which generates better attendance, which in turn means we can collect students’ cell phone numbers and put them into Blackboard Connect for future calling. It all works together.”

- Help control the story and provide credible information. The Blackboard Connect service is a critical component in Northwestern University’s commitment to functioning as the primary source of reliable information for campus constituents. According to Alan Cubbage, Vice President for University Relations at Northwestern University, “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.” And now universities can take that credible information and disseminate it through these social channels.

Social networking is currently the fastest growing mobile activity.

![YEAR-OVER-YEAR PERCENTAGE OF GROWTH IN APPLICATIONS ACCESSED BY MOBILE DEVICES](chart)

Source: comScore, June 2010

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Mary Kay Cooper
Alumni Relations Director
Trinity College in Texas
Blackboard works with private and public universities to disseminate important time-sensitive information with a multi-channel approach, most recently adding social media tools to the mix.

**Pikes Peak Community College, Colorado Springs, CO**

Pikes Peak Community College is located in Colorado Springs, Colorado and currently has about 20,000 students enrolled and attending classes across four campuses. As a commuter college, Pikes Peak initially began using social media in an effort to sustain student retention while attracting new prospective students.

“We’re trying to be wherever the students are – whether that’s e-mail or text messages or now on social media. We are finding that our students are [on social networks] and prefer that mode of communication,” said Parent.

Through the use of social media channels, PPCC maintains a consistent voice through streamlined messaging, while ensuring a constant presence by responding to questions or comments from students within an accessible online portal. Currently, PPCC’s Facebook page has been ‘liked’ by more than 1000 people, with the Twitter feed being followed by about 300 people.

Despite the prevalence of social media, PPCC doesn’t rely on it alone to communicate with the college community. For three years, Parent has used Blackboard Connect to relay time-sensitive information or important schedule changes to students, faculty and staff. In addition to sending out messages to the college community via phone calls, e-mail and text messages, PPCC updates their social media profiles simultaneously using the Blackboard Connect social media integration function.

“Our goal is to get the word out to as many media platforms as possible. However people are getting the information these days, we try to be there,” said Parent.

By using Blackboard Connect in combination with social networking sites, PPCC is able to share information with their campus community across all communication platforms and channels. To learn more about how Blackboard Connect can help you on your campus, visit [www.blackboard.com/connect](http://www.blackboard.com/connect).
Blackboard Connect for Higher Education

Whether it’s a time-sensitive situation or a routine event, safety, reliability, efficiency and speed are universal needs for university and college campuses. The Blackboard Connect service provides millions nationwide with time-sensitive information – via voice, text, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter, and more. It’s the proven way to alert your stakeholders and enhance their safety by keeping them informed, involved and prepared.

» **Prepare for the unexpected**: Notify and update students, faculty and staff within minutes of time-sensitive situations. Communicate with concise, timely information to help contain rumors, control media spin and maintain safety while providing information and reassurance to residents, businesses and media.

» **Involves and engages your campus community**: Leverage the power of ongoing, proactive communication to keep students, faculty and staff informed about day-to-day events that make a big difference in their lives—everything from cancelled classes to campus safety alerts.

» **Establish a leadership voice**: Deliver critical messages from campus leadership via voice, text, e-mail, Facebook, Twitter and more to ensure you reach your community anytime, anywhere with clear, up-to-date information.

» **Drive cost savings**: Because staying within budget is every bit as crucial as the ability to reach your entire campus our predictable cost structure won’t cause unexpected spikes in spending. There is no hardware, software, or additional phone lines required on your end. Multiple departments can also share use of the service.

» **Boost student retention**: Extend a helping hand to at-risk students with timely, relevant voice and text messages from faculty with information on extended office hours and tutoring that let them know you care about their success.

## Conclusion

No higher education institution can rely on one channel to communicate important information. Refining communications strategies for time-sensitive information is a continuous process. Colleges and universities need to stay abreast of new channels and integrate them alongside current channels. Blackboard is committed to helping institutions deploy a multi-channel communications approach to ensure the broadest and most timely dissemination of information when it matters most. If your organization is interested in exploring higher education mass notification and social media, contact Blackboard Connect to learn more.