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AACC keeps campus alert with text messages

By JON FOGG, Capital News Service

It was a sunny December day in Miami, but all Maury Chaput could see was snow.

Mr. Chaput, executive director of administrative services for Anne Arundel Community College, needed to issue a snow alert for the campus back in Arnold, but he was 1,000 miles away and his hotel lacked Internet service.

Thinking on his feet, Mr. Chaput pulled out his BlackBerry. Within a minute, a text message was sent to the cell phones of nearly 3,000 students, faculty and staff warning them of the impending flakes.

AACC is one of a growing number of colleges in the region to adopt newer technology to connect with its campus community. With nearly everyone on college campuses - especially students - carrying a cell phone today, schools are turning to text messaging to stay in touch during emergencies.

"The text messages go out a lot faster than e-mails," Mr. Chaput said. "A bomb scare on campus . . . a car accident . . . anything that you can think of that could go wrong, we can report it."

Many local governments, such as Rockville, College Park and Washington, D.C., and area school systems, including Anne Arundel's, use text-messaging alert systems such as School's Out and Roam Secure Inc.

While e-mail and Internet service can be shaky in times of crisis, text messages use little bandwidth, making them more reliable. Text messaging uses technology known as Short Message Service, which allows messages up to 160 characters long to be sent to cell phones, e-mail, personal data assistants and other devices.

As many as 18,000 text messages per minute can be beamed instantly, said Bryan Crum, a spokesman for Leesburg, Va.-based Omnilert.



Anne Arundel Community College signed up as a test customer for Omnilert's e2Campus notification service two years ago, Mr. Chaput said. Since then, school officials have posted 18 alerts - 17 for weather and one for a power outage.

Word of the service's success at AACC spread among administrators, and in October, the Universities at Shady Grove signed up with e2Campus for weather alerts. About 300 users have registered their cell phones for the service, said Russell Schlosburg, IT coordinator.

"We've been very satisfied so far with the service we've gotten," Mr. Schlosburg said. "It seems to be pretty fast, and everyone gets the message when they need to."

Although anyone on campus can sign up for the service, Omnilert is targeting students, Mr. Crum said.

"Really, the college student is probably the most frequent user of cell phones and text messages," Mr. Crum said. "Students are very open to try new things and new technologies."

Users don't pay for e2Campus - the school picks up the tab - but there may be a catch. Those without a text messaging option on their calling plan might be charged a fee by their provider when they receive messages, Mr. Crum said.

"If that doesn't appeal to them, they can opt out and have messages sent out another way," he said.

To combat privacy concerns, Omnilert stores users' cell phone numbers and other personal information on an encrypted server, Mr. Crum said. Users control their password and can withdraw from the service at any time.

Text messaging services such as e2Campus are an ideal way for colleges to alert students about campus crime, said Catherine Bath, executive director of Security on Campus Inc., a nonprofit organization promoting campus safety.

With studies showing only about half of colleges complying with federal crime-reporting law, Ms. Bath said, text-messaging services make it easier than ever for schools to keep students aware of crime.

Administrators at AACC agree, and they are planning to expand the scope of its alerts to include crime reporting, Mr. Chaput said. Both he and Mr. Schlosburg said the service has drawn positive reviews, and they couldn't remember anyone opting out.

But officials need to be wary, or students will tune out, Ms. Bath said.

"Schools need to use this system judiciously," Bath said. "They have

to save it for the really important things. If they're going to be sending three to four messages a day, they're going to desensitize students to the messages."

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