MILLERSVILLE UNIVERSITY

LESSONS LEARNED FROM A CAMPUS LOCKDOWN

Millersville University

CLIENT: Millersville University

LOCATION: Lancaster County, PA

CAMPUS: 8,000 students & 600 staff, 85 buildings on a 250 acre campus

CHALLENGE: Communicate rapidly and reliably with students, staff and visitors, wherever they are located, in the event of a crisis or lockdown.

SOLUTION: Omnilert

RESULTS: Omnilert successfully notified students, staff, and local media during multiple emergency scenarios and university lockdown, and played a role in helping apprehend the threatening individual.

Founded as a beacon of academic opportunity over 150 years ago, Millersville University (MU) is situated in the heart of Lancaster County, PA. This extensive and typically tranquil campus is home to nearly 8,000 students and 600 faculty staff. MU has 85 buildings across 250 acres, so ensuring the safety of this large and disparate campus population is an ongoing priority for college administrators.

THE CHALLENGE: RELIABLE COMMUNICATION

Emergencies take many forms – they can be weather-related, criminal, fire, chemical, and so on. Cognizant of these multiple threats, as well as the recent events in Virginia, MU committed itself to putting in place an emergency and safety infrastructure that anticipated worst case scenarios, while relying on communication best practices to protect its campus population.

Core to MU's emergency preparedness and planning was the need for a solution that underpinned its ability to communicate rapidly and reliably with students, staff, and visitors – wherever

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they are located – in the event of a crisis or lockdown. MU also needed a solution that could augment its media relations efforts during an emergency-- relaying information and alerts to parents, families and even students themselves who might lack access to other forms of campus communications.

THE SOLUTION: OMNILERT EMPOWERS CAMPUS ADMINISTRATORS

Omnilert proved to be the solution of choice for MU, empowering them to send instant alerts via multiple communications channels, from one-easy-to-use interface.

Omnilert provides higher education institutions with a self-service and full-service solution that allows administrators to send time-sensitive messages to students, faculty, and staff. Omnilert is a web-based system offering a centralized interface to instantly and simultaneously send advisories to thousands of people anywhere, anytime, on any device.

"A critical factor in selecting Omnilert was that the system affords us the ability to react quickly to protect students," said Dr. Aminta Breaux, Vice President of Student Affairs, MU. "In an emergency or any time we need to communicate quickly with students or staff on the move, we need to do so in a practical, reliable fashion. Omnilert is a proven and easy-to-use system that we can confidently count on to send very specific information to student cell phones – in an instant."

Soon after the Virginia Tech tragedy, MU implemented Omnilert under its own naming convention: MU|Alert.

THE RESULT: RAPID, COLLABORATIVE COMMUNICATION IN A LOCKDOWN

Less than a year after the tragedy at Virginia Tech, Millersville University faced a frightening multiple emergency situation of its own.

On the morning of April 1st, 2008, a fire broke out in a large academic building. The incident was attended by University Police and the local fire department, accompanied by Patrick Weidinger, Director of Safety at MU. While this incident unfolded, reports simultaneously came in to the MU police department that a student was making threats of violence against other students.

Campus administrators faced an uncertain few moments and immediately looked to their emergency pre-planning training and put a "multiple emergency" scenario plan into effect.

Unable to locate the student, a decision was made to issue a notification declaring that a university lockdown was in effect.

During the crisis period, Patrick Weidinger noticed an astonishing rise in Omnilert enrollment. Prior to the incident, 2,000 students were registered for MU|Alert; in the days after the incident enrollment rose to over 4,000 as students and faculty staff, as well as reporting media registered their cell phones to stay informed.

By the time the third MU|Alert had been sent, the name of the suspect was known and administrator's used the system to alert individuals of his identity.

Demonstrating the collaborative nature of the response effort on campus that day, it was a group of intrepid students who identified and located the suspect after matching his name to his Facebook page. Within 20 minutes of this third message, the suspect was apprehended and placed into custody. With a fourth and final "all clear" message from MU|Alert and after 90 minutes, the emergency was over.

"The fast and appropriate reactions of everyone on campus, together with our pre-planning and training efforts meant we were able to resolve the crisis without panic", said Patrick Weidinger. "We were also savvy enough to use the media to our advantage. Our expert communications team had spearheaded media training among faculty members and we relied on the NBC affiliate WGAL to get the message out to the community at large."

LESSONS LEARNED

Following the events of April 1st, 2008, the media responded with praise for the university's handling of the incident, with the Lancaster Intelligencer editorial commenting: "The university community deserves credit for reacting quickly and responsibly to quell the danger...the lessons learned that day have helped other educational institutions protect their students."

"We faced many unexpected challenges such as getting the message out to disparate teams – for example, we had to inform our on-campus maintenance crews to move indoors and stay there," said Patrick Weidinger.

"We also quickly realized that we needed a better plan for redundancy across other communication vehicles, including the university website (home to additional emergency information) and local cell phone towers. With the volume of bandwidth being consumed during the incident, these IT systems soon crashed or were intermittent at best," added Weidinger.

Dr. Aminta Breaux said, "The single greatest lesson we learned from this incident was that we can't rely on one form of communication during a campus emergency. In light of this, we have employed a variety of additional tactics to equip MU with a fully-redundant, layered emergency communications strategy that enhances our proven commitment to emergency pre-planning and training best practices."

Other communication improvement initiatives:

- Installation of new outdoor loudspeakers to alert those not enrolled in Omnilert

- Launch of "web-lite" version of MU's homepage to free up bandwidth for emergency communications

- Closer integration between 911 and MU emergency alerts for quick notification during crisis

- Extend reach of Omnilert notifications to include school district officials

About Omnilert

Omnilert is the pioneer in emergency notification and management solutions and a leader in the higher education market. Its reliable product offerings provide organizations with peace of mind by streamlining instantaneous communications and response efforts to promote safety, security, and compliance.

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