Technology in the Time of Crisis: A Dean's Perspective

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As a dean of students at one of the nation's premier two-year institutions of higher education, I find myself perplexed, concerned, yet committed to finding remedies to the various crises that have plagued our campuses across the country. I remember the day, Monday, April 16, 2007, when Seung-Hui Cho killed 32 innocent victims and wounded many others at Virginia Tech. This massacre was considered to be one of the deadliest shooting rampages by a single gunman in the history of the United States. When this horrific tragedy took place, I had been dean of students for eight months. I was well aware and very astute on how to handle various crises on my campus, but I was *never* prepared to deal with the magnitude of tragedy that Virginia Tech had to endure.

On this tragic day, with a tearful eye, I remember saying to myself a multitude of things: "My God, please tell me this isn't happening! Please stop this madness! The poor students! Why did they have to die? What about their families and loved ones?" And lastly, "What if this happened to my students? Am I prepared to deal with this on my campus?"

The very next morning when I arrived to my office, I remember immediately gathering my staff together to plan a Day of Remembrance for those who lost their lives to this exceptionally horrific event. I wanted to be able to do something positive and show Virginia Tech and the higher education community that my college shows their support in a time of crisis. I knew that if I was concerned about the safety of our students that many others would, too.

Slowly, but surely, I began to receive phone calls and e-mails from concerned parents asking me what my institution was doing to ensure the safety of their sons and daughters. Discussing the college's emergency response guide was definitely not sufficient for these concerned parents. They wanted more. They wanted to be assured that the college was prepared to communicate rapidly and effectively of any potential harm or danger to their son or daughter and the immediate college community.

Within the next couple of weeks, I made sure that I put together a crisis management team to address the needs and concerns of the institution's constituencies. The primary purpose of the crisis management team was to create a comprehensive crisis management plan. In this plan, a major component was to delineate exactly how the institution could quickly disseminate communication to our students and the campus community in the case of a major crisis.

After the crisis management team took shape and diligently began working on its goals and objectives, another very fatal incident occurred less than 60 miles from my campus on February 14, 2008. Northern Illinois University (NIU) was shaken as it experienced, first-hand, the trauma of yet another campus shooting on its very own soil. I immediately began to wonder if I was having another déjà vu moment. The familiarity of this situation jolted me into a panic. Every thought that came to mind about Virginia Tech was magnified and threw me back into a state of anguish and distress.

Almost immediately, Northern Illinois University began posting updates on their website informing students, parents, faculty, staff, and the community play-by-play moments as information arrived. Although this form of technology did not necessarily save lives, it provided a series of information

that helped to ease the apprehension of all those concerned, while providing critical safety information. But, was NIU's website the only form of communication used to disseminate critical information quickly? The correct answer is a resounding "No." It was the students who served as a conduit and were exceptionally speedy in adding an additional layer of communication in relaying information to their families, friends, and loved ones.

It is no surprise that living in the age of the digital student, many of these techno savvy individuals were quickly able to access and post blogs, send e-mails, text messages, and utilize social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook within minutes of a crisis. In this day and age, technology in the time of crisis is absolutely critical. Today's technology is integral in sharing and disseminating volumes of information in a matter of a few keystrokes and clicks.

Many institutions of higher education have moved towards implementing and purchasing an emergency mass alert notification system. This technological system is considered to be cutting edge in delivering communications in the time of crises. Through this web-based system, users are able to quickly and effortlessly communicate a message to large groups of people through a multitude of options (telephone/cell phone, email, text messages, PDA's and other wireless devices). For nearly any type of emergency scenario, this form of technology quickly distributes critical information to a particular designated audience.

Through the lessons of our sister institutions, we have been educated that a crisis is the most paramount unplanned activity and the ultimate test for leaders at any institution of higher education. Educational leaders are no longer surprised that in a time of crisis, conventional administrative practices are inadequate and ways of responding are usually insufficient. What lessons have we learned from our fellow institutions that have had members of their communities face human catastrophe? What knowledge have we garnered from our students that are continually staying abreast and on the cutting edge of technology? How do we capitalize on this knowledge? Most importantly, what are *you* doing to ensure the safety of your students and the campus community? Are you prepared to use technology in the time of crisis?