

**The Importance of Trust in the Effectiveness of Collegiate Emergency Notification Systems
(ENS)**

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COM 537: Crisis Communication and IMC - White Paper

Word Count: 1,269

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April 26, 2026

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Emergency notification systems (ENS) are integrated platforms used by universities to provide alerts and actionable information during perceived risks or emergencies. As technological changes emerged, ENS offered a rapid-response option for crisis situations, delivering critical information to campus stakeholders. While ENS and its associated alerts have changed over time, there continue to be challenges that prevent optimal performance and engagement. The effectiveness of ENS on college campuses depends on trust, multi-channel integration and training that will be demonstrated through a detailed look at the problems and solutions to stronger ENS and alerts at higher education institutions.

Problems Associated with Emergency Alert Systems on College Campuses

As college students, faculty, staff and community members visit, live, study and/or work on college campuses, it is important to discuss the safety and security of higher education institutions. After the Virginia Tech shooting in 2007, many emergency alert systems were overhauled to align with advancing technology, provide more widespread, real-time cross-channel alerts and align with mandates within the Clery Act (Elsass, McKenna, & Schildkraut, 2016; Han, Ada, Sharman, & Rao, 2015). An example of multichannel importance emerged when cell phone and internet connections experienced outages during Hurricane Katrina and both Tulane and Louisiana State Universities had to communicate via radio and campus websites (Elsass et al., 2106). Today, most colleges utilize emergency alert systems that provide multifaceted communications to reach diverse audiences across a campus on any given day.

However, “problems with campus emergency notification systems continue to persist” (Elsass et al., 2016, p. 330). Providing messages through ENS is important, but what continues to

be critical is the action that individuals on campus take based on their trust and engagement with the alert itself (Han et al., 2015). The harrowing incident at Virginia Tech, where 32 students and faculty lost their lives, is a clear example of how accuracy and timely messaging through ENS can save lives (Elsass et al., 2016). In an emergency situation, every second counts and redundancy of messaging is important (Elsass et al., 2016). With channel integration remaining an important part of any ENS, fragmentation can still occur when multiple messages are communicated across email, text message/SMS, app push alerts, screen display takeovers, campus-wide auditory alerts and more.

Beyond timeliness and effective messages, higher education institutions communicate multiple messages a day. An ENS that lacks its audience's attention or trust becomes a risk to the institution. Voluntary participation and lack of compliance are often factors that contribute to low engagement (Elsass et al., 2016; Han et al., 2015). While ENS are common on campus, the human capital investment and ongoing training provided to staff charged with operating these systems remain an important consideration. Without addressing ENS effectiveness, institutions face risk and accountability for safety and security missteps.

Solutions for Increasing the Effectiveness of Campus Emergency Alert Infrastructure

By using crisis communication praxis as a guide, campus emergency notification alerts must be treated as dynamic, integrated communication systems in order to reach their highest capabilities and impact. Building a community of compliance, however, is not an easy task.

In order for campus stakeholders to take the desired actions, ENS alerts must maintain credibility through consistently clear instructions. Etzioni's compliance theory and its connection to perceived safety directly demonstrate that actions are not always taken (Han et al., 2015). This

emphasizes the need for ENS messaging to be trusted by its audience. Han et al. (2015) reiterate this concept in that:

Trust toward the notification messages focuses on the quality of the information. For students to take immediate action as instructed, they need to believe that the messages are critical—that is, that the messages correctly convey the urgency, severity, and timing of the incident. They also need to trust that the instructions provided in the messages are actionable. (p. 914)

In practice, this means alerts must be consistent across channels and quickly provide the information critical to take action, if needed. Situational crisis communication theory also recommends that the type of communication is dictated by the crisis that is unfolding (Ulmer, Sellnow, & Seeger, 2023). For example, a tornado watch versus an active shooter threat would necessitate different levels of messaging.

Trust is built when ENS is deployed and is successful repeatedly. Beyond prompt and tailored alerts, it is important to acknowledge that Han et al. (2015) found “subjective norm and information quality trust are critical factors that positively influence immediate compliance” (p. 923). The principles of Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication are a helpful way to maintain both norms and quality related to campus alert systems by using the screens of “be first/right/credible, express empathy, promote action and show respect” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2018, p. 3). To avoid mistrust and confusion, especially with the real-time connection of social media and other platforms, confirmed information must be quickly made available, updated throughout the incident and consistent across all channels utilized by the ENS.

Crisis communication and emergency preparedness on college campuses are consistently changing. It is important to focus resources on training ENS users and campus stakeholders, while also optimizing processes. The U.S. Department of Education (2013) notes that “Repetition in training and preparedness shortens the time it takes to orient, observe, and act” (p. 82). Emergency notification systems are most effective when their alert recipients are educated and trained, which leads to better engagement and operational alignment (Elsass et al., 2016). With an aim to continually optimize emergency messaging through tests and drills of the system, campus stakeholders should also participate in training sessions that allow for a more empowered understanding of how to respond in a crisis (Han et al., 2015). Additionally, during review and recovery periods, data related to crisis situations and ENS user engagement should be analyzed to enhance messaging, alerts and overall compliance.

Conclusion

While the infrastructure and technology of emergency notification systems on college campuses is important, the effectiveness of alerts is based on trust among stakeholders. The connection and speed of information flow over the last decade continue to shape the ability to clearly and consistently provide important action-oriented messages across channels during a crisis. The desired action of these messages hinges on the confidence and training of each college campus and its community. The highest-performing ENS and crisis communications will be modeled at institutions that invest in education, training and foster trust in these safety systems to protect students, faculty, staff and visitors on college campuses.

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