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Evaluating the Response

Soon after a 911 call tipped off campus police to a shooting at the West Ambler Johnston Hall dorm at about 7:15 a.m. on Monday, administrators at Virginia Tech set in motion a sequence of events in a process that some are now criticizing.

Once police had briefed university officials about the reported violence, a crisis communication plan last updated in the wake of September 11 went into action. The plan, which designates a “core crisis team” and sets guidelines for keeping students, parents, police and the media informed, became the basis for the university’s response to that first shooting as well as the bloody mass killing that followed it some two hours later on the other side of campus.

That response has become the focus of [intense criticism](#) from parents of Virginia Tech students and security consultants who focus on higher education — even as families, friends and university officials [gathered in a convocation to honor the dead](#). The president of the university, Charles Steger, has consistently defended the administration’s handling of the crisis, which has come under fire particularly for a [two-hour period](#) between the initial shootings and the first campus-wide e-mail warning students about the incident. Classes were not canceled until after the gunman, who police say was 23-year-old student Cho Seung-Hui, rampaged through an academic building, Norris Hall, apparently killing himself afterwards.

Other officials who backed the university’s actions included Virginia’s secretary of public safety, John Marshall, who said at a press conference, “President Steger and his staff made the right decisions based on the best information they had available at the time.”

But the elapsed time between the first shooting and the second — Steger said they believed at first that it was a single, isolated incident — along with Virginia Tech’s experience with reports of an armed suspect on campus last year and bomb threats last week, have led some to question whether the campus was as prepared as it should have been and did all it could to prevent further harm to its students and faculty once initial reports surfaced. Criticism may well increase because of Tuesday’s news that the killer’s writings had prompted a professor to [raise questions about him](#) with university authorities. (See [related article here](#).)

[The New York Times](#) reported this morning that during those crucial two hours, police were pursuing and questioning the boyfriend of a student who was one of the two killed in the first shootings. According to the *Times*, the roommate of Emily Hilscher, the student, told authorities that Hilscher’s boyfriend had guns in his townhouse, and authorities were questioning the boyfriend when reports arrived of the second round of shootings.

University officials are reluctant to comment on their own performance Monday morning besides expressing approval of the steps they took given the known facts. And even those making criticisms now

acknowledge that many facts have yet to become clear, and that situations like these can evolve in the public's perception. But any evaluation of the response begins with the blueprint: the [crisis communication plan](#), which states, among other things, that “[e]ffective communications will help quell rumors, maintain morale, and ensure continued orderly operations of the university.”

To be sure, a tragedy of this magnitude — the worst mass shooting in American history, with 33 dead and more wounded — could hardly have been predicted. The ghost of Columbine, the 1999 shooting that ended in the deaths of 12 students, a teacher and two teenaged assassins, haunted officials mostly at public middle and high schools. Until now, the most significant massacre on an American college campus was at the University of Texas at Austin in 1966, when a sniper killed 15 people. In 1989, a gunman killed 14 women at the École Polytechnique in Montreal.

But the real-time aspect of Monday's crisis, in which some students who might still have been in danger weren't informed of the ongoing situation, sets the situation apart from other mass killings.

The plan's guidelines on contacting students during a crisis don't appear to weigh the possibility of an impending disaster, suggesting publication in the student paper, [The Collegiate Times](#), the Internet, e-mail, radio, fliers and even “mass meetings.” It continues, “Dedicated phone lines with taped messages can also be set up by Communications Network Services. A voice mail broadcast to all resident students can be issued by contacting Communications Network Services....”

As a result, the university had to improvise. “I would say [the guidelines] were adapted, because the crisis communication plan helps identify who should be at the table, where to meet, when to meet, how to meet,” said Mark Owczarski, director of news and information at Virginia Tech. “As soon as that team is convened, you have the sharing of information from all the parties engaged in that crisis.”

The plan, for instance, states that the “core crisis team” should first “designate a spokesperson,” suggesting the associate vice president for university relations. But on Monday, as Owczarski pointed out, there were more than a few officials speaking on behalf of Virginia Tech — from the president, Steger, up to Gov. Tim Kaine (through his own staff from Tokyo, where he was at the time) and President Bush during a news conference. “I do think you have to adapt to the situation at hand; that situation frankly changes hourly,” Owczarski said.

The shifting and unpredictable nature of the crisis didn't stop critics, however, from attacking the university's response, presumably encompassing both the implementation and the plan itself. ([The Washington Post](#) is reporting that the state may eventually authorize an independent investigation.)

Some of those criticizing offer businesses that provide advice or services of the sort they say the university needed. Christopher Simpson, the CEO of SimpsonScarborough, a higher education branding and communications strategy firm, focused specifically on what he saw as a lackluster online response from the university. “There was very little information on that Web site for the first four to five hours,” said Simpson, who has advised colleges during public relations crises. “We know if you tried to call into Tech yesterday, most cell phones would not work. If I'm trying to call my son or daughter and can't get them, the next place I'm going to try is the Web. So I think they failed in using the Web, which is your most important and valuable communication tool, certainly for the first six to seven hours of this crisis.”

Besides the Internet, a key component of the university's communication strategy was e-mail. “At the end of the day, people are going to lose their jobs over this,” said Andy Beedle, CEO of [abeedle.com](#), which works with colleges and universities on targeted mass e-mailings. Beedle's own experience with mass electronic communication, and his company's proximity to Blacksburg, where Virginia Tech is

located, provide him with additional perspective. “What I’m puzzled about is the idea that sending out an e-mail to people is going to warn them about any imminent danger,” Beedle said. “It’s something that I would send as part of a larger strategy, but boy, it wouldn’t be a very big part of my plan to inform people.”

One reason is that e-mail, as Mike Strecker, the director of public relations at Tulane University, put it, is a “passive” way of disseminating information. Chris Herndon, a sophomore at Virginia Tech majoring in hospitality management and accounting, first heard about the initial shooting at a bus stop at around 9:45 a.m. when a bus driver told him to get back inside. Nevertheless, Herndon didn’t criticize the administration. “I support all their decisions fully,” he said in an e-mail.

Beyond e-mail, the campus has “loudspeakers all over” and a “very solid phone-tree system,” Beedle noted — and while some reports have noted announcements over the speaker system as well as eventual voice messages sent out to students, they did not seem to be major components of the response.

But the one medium that the university could not take advantage of was also the one that most experts cited as being the most useful: text messages. While not a major component of most universities’ crisis strategies at the moment, the messages are beginning to take hold. One university that has been a pioneer in using text messaging is Montclair State University, a mostly commuter campus in New Jersey that requires all incoming students to purchase a cell phone and service that are compatible with the campus’s network. “We’ve made some deliberate decisions about it, and that is that we’ll only use it for emergency reasons,” said Karen Pennington, the vice president of student development and campus life.

Strecker, at Tulane, described his university’s response system for hurricanes as a mixture of cutting-edge and traditional forms of communication. The university relies on an alert line whose number is distributed to students on stickers, he said, as well as the website and e-mails. “You have to look at high-tech as well as low-tech devices, something as simple as, are bullhorns appropriate?” he said. “Public-address systems of some type. I think all of that is going to be examined” in the wake of Monday’s massacre. But Strecker also said that text messaging seemed to be an ideal “active” form of communication. “Our plan worked perfectly for that kind of emergency,” such as during Hurricane Katrina, “but I think this is a new type of emergency that has to be dealt with differently,” he said.

Most of the attention to Virginia Tech’s response to Monday’s events has focused on communication — with students and later with families and loved ones. But besides the administration’s role, there’s always the campus police — usually thought of as an easy target. So far, at least, the police’s security role has gone relatively unscathed in the annals of public criticism.

“Ever since Columbine happened, most law enforcement agencies have beefed up their training to deal with shooters in situations like that,” said Sgt. Kermit Moore, who works in the Roanoke County sheriff’s office and has participated in the department’s homeland defense school, which also trained members of the Virginia Tech police force. “I think they were probably about as prepared as they were going to be once the shootings began.” The Virginia Tech police receive the same training as local police in the area.

Moore also implicitly deflected criticism from the police. “You can arm the students with information,” he said. “I think by getting students involved a lot faster, you can make them a participant. It helps people not to be victims, if they can take an active role, and they can’t do that if they don’t know what’s going on.”

One of the solutions likely *not* on the table at Virginia Tech — but quickly raised in [blogosphere chatter](#)

in the aftermath of the shootings — is the idea that arming students with more than just information might make the campus safer. Public sentiment is likely to move in precisely the opposite direction, and even before the attacks, Virginia Tech had already once reiterated its gun ban. A student who brought a gun to class — with a legal concealed handgun permit — sparked a debate that led to a [piece of legislation](#) that would have allowed handguns on campus. The bill didn't make it through committee last year.

Back at Virginia Tech, officials are still in crisis mode. But soon enough, whether or not students are ready, classes will have to resume, casting at least a semblance of normalcy on a wounded campus. At that time, there will surely be some internal soul-searching. “I think ... you'd be foolish to say that you aren't going to make some revisions” to the plan, Owczarski said. “There's always room for improvement. But it did provide structure, it provided guidelines, it provided assistance and support, which is exactly what a crisis communication plan is intended to do.”

It likely won't only be officials in Blacksburg taking a second look at their policies. Strecker, at Tulane, predicted a broader reevaluation of campus security in the wake of this week's gruesome attacks. “One thing about a tragedy is that you're able to learn lessons, and I think everybody in the higher-education community is looking at this as an opportunity to revisit their own communication and security measures,” he said.

— [Andy Guess](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
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