

College CIOs Work on Emergency Communications

June 12, 2007 11:42AM

"We had done several things prior to Virginia Tech, but there are many things to be learned from that tragedy," said St. John's CIO Joseph Tufano. He added that sending voice and text-messaging alerts to the cell phones of students is "a good idea, but not everybody has one, and we do turn them off in classes."

The mass shootings at Virginia Tech have become a call to action for many university I.T. managers, who are being asked to find new methods -- including [wireless](#) approaches -- of communicating quickly with students and workers during emergencies. Several university CIOs who attended Computerworld's Mobile & Wireless World conference recently said that they are under scrutiny as school officials look to bolster emergency communication capabilities following the Virginia Tech shootings, which resulted in the deaths of 32 victims and the shooter. "That unfortunate disaster has had a big effect on all colleges," said Jay Dominick, CIO at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, N.C. "I've been in constant meetings since it happened to talk about ways we can better communicate on campus in such situations." Dominick said in an interview after speaking at the conference that although Virginia Tech officials were "pilloried" for waiting more than two hours to send out an e-mail notice about an initial shooting incident in a dormitory, it's unlikely that things would have been done any differently at most other colleges. "I think they did a great job getting the word out," he said. "Most campuses wouldn't even have the processes in place to know what things to do to respond to such an emergency within that amount of time." Next month, Dominick expects to decide whether to expand a pilot program in which cell phones equipped with applications useful for classes and campus life were sold to Wake Forest students. As part of the pilot program, which started last September, Wake Forest and Cingular Wireless LLC (now part of AT&T Inc.) sold Cingular 8125 phones to 100 students for \$299 each. The phones can work in Wi-Fi mode or on the Cingular cellular network, and the vendor gave the students a 20% discount on its voice and data plans. Dominick said that the pilot worked fairly well but that the devices were expensive and complicated to use. And although the 8125s could be used to send quick notifications of emergencies through voice or text messages, rolling them out to all of Wake Forest's 4,300 undergraduates by the start of the next school year might not be possible. Dominick said that he might consider a simpler, less costly device instead. St. John's University in New York also is considering adopting new communications and [security](#) technologies in the aftermath of the shootings at Virginia Tech, formally known as Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.