Gordon
College

Location: Wenham, Massachusetts
Campus Type: Suburban
Enrollment: Approx. 1,500 undergraduates
& 350+ graduate students
Faculty/Staff: 630
Campus Size: 400+ acres
Number of buildings: 37

When an emergency situation strikes a college or university, school safety personnel must react quickly to provide potentially life-saving information to thousands of students, faculty, and staff spread across campus. Many higher education campuses use several different mass communication systems to send alerts via email, text messages, phone, pop-up desktop notifications, digital signage overrides, and more.
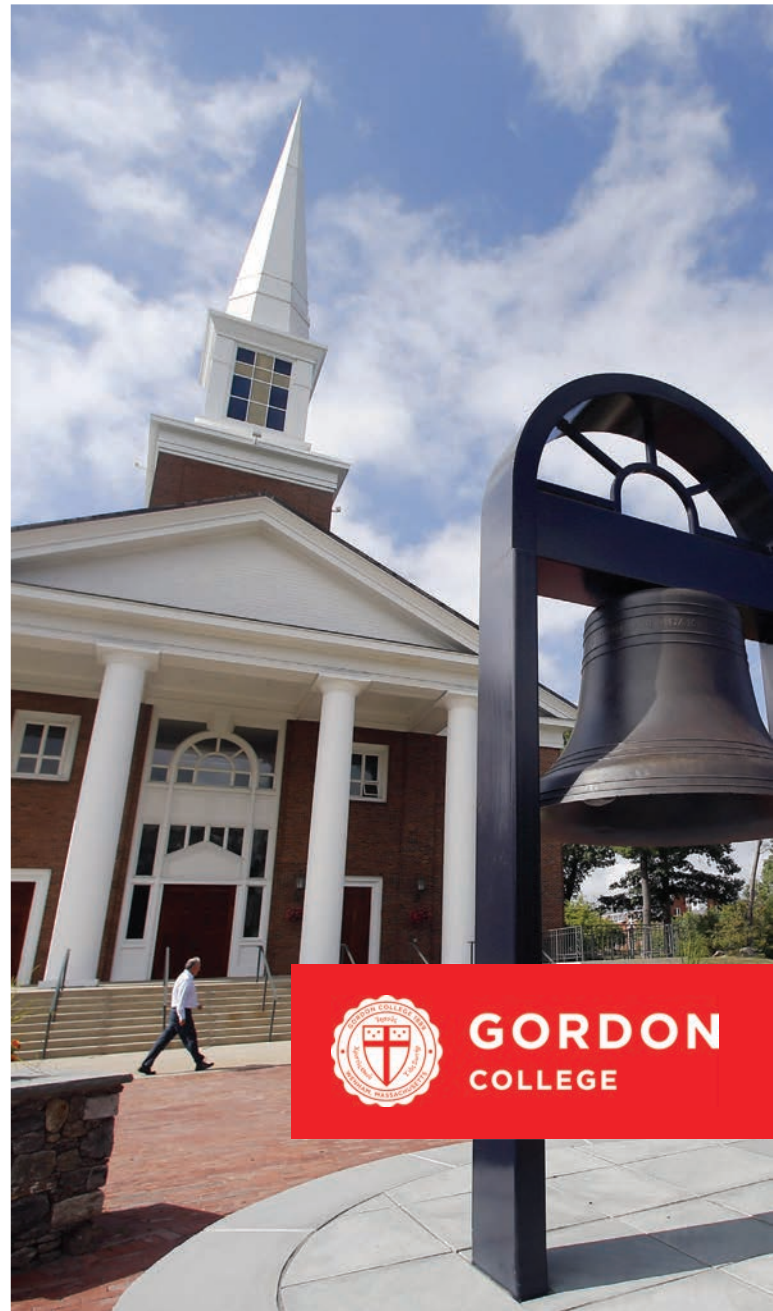
The Challenge

Deploying multiple alert systems can be a hindrance that slows your emergency response.

"During a crisis, you don't have time to go down a checklist of all the systems you need to activate," said Chris Jones, Vice President for Administration and Emergency Management Coordinator for Gordon College. "The list for activating our various emergency notification systems was daunting, even when the pressure of an emergency was not on."

Gordon College's list included systems for: text, email, and phone alerting; website banner messages; and digital signage. In addition to requiring multiple logins for activation, the systems were previously operated separately by the campus police and IT departments, potentially creating confusion in the event of an emergency.

The Need for Unification

Jones recognized the need to unify the school's emergency notification efforts and create a more cohesive mass notification system. "I've gained more oversight of both the campus police and IT departments, and it has been a huge

advantage because I have been able to get these departments working more closely together," explained Jones. "When it came to unified mass notification, I didn't know what was possible until I saw the Alertus Mass Notification System at a trade show." The Alertus System makes unification possible by leveraging existing infrastructure and IT assets to seamlessly integrate disparate and legacy systems.

"Now we can simultaneously activate all of the school's mass communications systems (phone, email, text, website updates, and digital signage) with one click," said Jones.

Since Gordon College has a small police force, quick distribution of vital alert messages presented a challenge. With single point of activation capability, the Alertus System now allows officers to utilize student dispatchers for mass notification activation under their direction. "During a crisis, being able to set up pre-scripted alerts to fire off with one button press or one click can really help save lives," added Jones.

Unified and Flexible

While the Alertus System provides Jones with the option to bring all of the school's notification systems together as one unified system, he still has the flexibility to activate each system separately. "I am not a fan of putting all your eggs in one basket, so I actually like having multiple systems," explained Jones. "I've been through situations where the lone notification system has gone down and you look around saying, 'Now what?'"

Alertus Desktop™ Notification can deliver a facility-wide emergency notification in a matter of seconds.

Jones faced this "now what" scenario when a severe windstorm knocked out power on campus. Making matters worse, the storm blew down a large tree that took out a telephone pole and caused the cell towers to lose service. This created great difficulty in communicating with the campus during the power outage as the school was reliant on cell phones to reach students and faculty with text and email alert messaging. "This really showed us we need that multi-module mass notification system through several systems to get the word out," said Jones.

"One of the best things about Alertus is that it is modular so I can deploy small parts at a time," explained Jones. "We do not have a large budget at Gordon College, so I am adding Alertus components as funds become available." Due to the school's budget constraints, Jones first implemented desktop alerting through the Alertus Safe in Seconds initiative, which offers the Alertus Desktop™ Notification at no cost to schools in need of safety and notification system support. With the help of the initiative, Jones installed desktop alerting on all school-owned computers.

Jones has since added more than 30 Alertus Alert Beacons® — wall-mounted devices that can be installed almost anywhere, produce attention-grabbing bright flashes and loud sounds, and display a custom message about the nature of the emergency and how to respond — and Alertus Text-to-Speech Self-Amplified Speakers in the Gordon's science center for clear, intelligible audible alerting on the PA system.

Ready if the Time Comes

Fortunately, the school has not had to activate the Alertus System for a major emergency. Jones and his team perform daily, monthly, and yearly tests of various parts of the system and there has not been a single failure. "The Alertus System has been 100 percent stable," shared Jones.

The wall-mounted Alertus Alert Beacon® sounds, flashes, and displays an alert message in the event of an emergency.

Beyond Emergency Alerting

Student Response Team

Once Jones saw the power and flexibility of the Alertus System, he realized it could be used as a mass notification platform for both critical emergencies and everyday campus situations, including empowering their student response team.

Gordon's student-worker dispatchers, which make up part of the campus police department, didn't always feel self-assured about their responsibilities. To help boost their confidence, the Gordon team opted to maximize the Alertus System capabilities for protocol reinforcement and reminders.

"We took guesswork and hesitation out of the equation. I love that now, when a call comes in, our protocol automatically appears on the screen for student dispatchers and walks them through exactly what they need to do," Jones shared.

Campus Fire & Burglar Alarms

Even though Gordon's campus fire alarms are monitored by a third party fire alarm monitoring system, the Gordon team noticed the monitoring company was taking up to three to five minutes to inform them of a trigger. For increased peace of mind and a more efficient monitoring process, Jones worked with the fire alarm companies to get contact closures for each fire alarm. These contact closures now trigger Gordon's Alert Beacons and immediately notify campus dispatchers if a fire alarm goes off.

Gordon is following a similar monitoring process for its burglar alarms. "Burglars know it can take multiple minutes for police to be notified of burglar alarm activity, but now that we have our alarms integrated with Alertus, we are able to notify officers instantly."

System Monitoring & Property Conservation

In addition, Gordon is now leveraging the Alertus System for continuous monitoring of low-level emergencies and property conservation situations.

Server Room Water & Temperature

To address challenges with environmental monitoring in the school's server rooms, Gordon wired their digital thermometers into Alert Beacons. Now, campus police, as well as the IT department, receive alerts about any overheating issues in the server room via text message and phone call.

"The alerts are smart in that they provide a precise location and reiterate the importance of the notification until acknowledged. This process has worked multiple times and told us when we were having problems with heat or an HVAC system."

Boiler Systems

Most recently, Gordon has been using Alertus System integration to monitor the flow switch for various boiler systems throughout the school. This is especially beneficial during the winter season when a circulation malfunction is more likely. If the flow switch closes, appropriate maintenance personnel will be immediately alerted.

"There are so many parts of the Alertus System you can leverage in targeted, strategic ways for different kinds of low-level emergencies and everyday property conservation. We've seen significant value in these more non-traditional uses at Gordon, and I'd encourage everyone to explore these possibilities for their own organizations," Jones advised.

Next Steps

With resource constraints in mind, Gordon College will continue to build out the Alertus System in a modular way as their needs evolve. Eventually, Jones would like to deploy an outdoor siren and PA system for enhanced outdoor alerting.