



State University scores high marks in alerting students when danger threatens

University police efforts at establishing a comprehensive emergency alerting system for a California State University passes the test when school is presented with real threats.

Customer Profile:

California State University San Marcos provides a dynamic educational environment in the beautiful foothills of northern San Diego County.

Problem:

How to reach a large number of students, faculty and staff at once in an emergency or when danger threatens.

Solution:

With MIR3, CSUSM can now reach groups and individuals on almost any device in just moments.

Benefit:

Student safety is improved by rapid access to critical information that is delivered via a wide variety of modes.

The university environment

The CSU system is a leader in high-quality, accessible, student-focused higher education. With 23 campuses, almost 447,000 students, and 45,000 faculty and staff, it is the largest, most diverse, and one of the most affordable university systems in the country.

CSU San Marcos (CSUSM) provides a dynamic academic environment where students can thrive and gain the skills they need for success in life. The University is located in the beautiful foothills of northern San Diego County in the city of San Marcos, a community of more than 80,000 residents. The University has over 20 buildings on a 304-acre campus with roughly 13,000 students and 2,000 faculty and staff.

The Problem: Reaching thousands of students at once

It used to be that colleges were viewed as safe and protected places of earnest learning. That image has been shattered by events over recent years, and schools like CSUSM have since taken a much more active stance in guarding the safety of each and every student. However, a campus environment is rarely still, with students, faculty, staff and visitors alike on the move throughout an average day, and sharing important information with everyone at once is challenging.

When emergency manager Robert Williams started working with the University Police Department several years ago, he wanted to

be sure that existing systems could be counted on to not only alert people across the sprawling campus, but to also reach students' families, students that were off campus and even members of the media and nearby community. In evaluating the existing tools he found that although he had all the elements needed to reach the people he wanted to reach, the system was not integrated, so sounding the alarm was complicated and time-consuming.

The Solution: MIR3

When looking at the existing solutions, Williams was impressed with the emergency notification system, MIR3®, that delivered alerts by text, email and phone. He approached the team at OnSolve™ to see if they had any ideas for integrating the product in a way that would also activate the other alerting mechanisms on campus, like speakers, digital signage, desktop alerts on computers and even locking campus doors if a shut-down were called for. Working together, Williams and the OnSolve team found a way to integrate the system, known to those on campus as AlertU, in a way that was all too soon to be tested in unexpected ways.

On the afternoon of May 14, 2014, a day of triple-digit heat and gusty Santa Ana winds, a 911 call came in to the CSUSM emergency operations center saying that a fire had erupted in the dry, brush-covered hills just south of the campus. Students had to be

alerted and evacuated quickly, and families needed to be notified. "The AlertU system worked exactly as expected," says Williams. "Over 33,000 emails, 25,000 phone calls, and 11,000 texts were delivered within five minutes and an orderly and complete evacuation ensued."

Soon firefighters began arriving from all over the state and set up operations on the near-empty campus. "The impact to the community and the students was huge," says Williams. "Although we kept everyone in the loop with Twitter and website updates, the school ended up being closed for a week, delaying commencement ceremonies and interfering with travel plans for students and their families." The Cocos fire eventually burned its way right up to the back door of the campus, consuming nearly 2,000 acres and leveling 36 homes and one business.

Williams is big on training—so when students get the alert, they know exactly what to do. This became invaluable just three months later when a man was sighted crossing the campus, reportedly with an assault rifle slung over his shoulder. With the push of a button, alerts were delivered by all modes and the school went into immediate lockdown while a local SWAT team and university police performed a security sweep. During the incident, four updates were delivered to those in lockdown to keep them aware of how the situation was developing. The man with a rifle was eventually identified as a staff member carrying an over-sized umbrella as unseasonable storms were expected; the lockdown was quickly ended. "Although all of us were relieved that the incident was a false alarm, staff and students appreciated that they'd recently been trained in what to do in case of an active shooter," said Williams. "And of course, everyone appreciates the all-clear message once a situation is resolved."

Enhanced communications save time, money and resources

Williams sees that the system is tested twice each year, once in the spring and once each October as part of the Great American Shakeout, California's statewide earthquake preparedness day. Students are automatically opted into the AlertU system when they enroll at the school and can enroll their parents as well, or parents can enroll themselves with Account Portal, a customizable Web-based portal that makes it easy for them to keep their own profile information up to date. Since phone numbers can change at any time, all contact data is synchronized weekly using DataSync, the streamlined solution for importing contact data from LDAP or third-party applications.

How CSUSM benefits from MIR3:

- **Ease of use** – Launching a notification can be done in seconds. On-call initiators can log in from anywhere with an Internet-connected device and choose to send critical communications immediately.
- **Targeted recipient groups** – Standard edition can send messages to specific groups of people, organized by geographic zone or recipient type (faculty, staff, student, etc.).
- **Data security with ISO 27001 and SSAE 16 compliance** – OnSolve hosts all student data in geographically dispersed, multiple-redundant data centers, meeting the highest standards for data security and privacy.

The end result

Williams praises the OnSolve team for all their help along the way, saying, "The team was always accessible and helpful and willing to figure out a way to make my crazy ideas work." And now that CSUSM has actually tested the system under real-life threats, he can sleep at night knowing the system works as designed and is an integral part of helping keep the campus safe.

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Emergency manager
CSU San Marcos

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