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The company's flagship product, CampusCruiser® was launched in 1999. In recent years, Timecruiser has expanded to include CourseCruiser™ Learning Management System, which assists faculty in efficiently managing and delivering learning content and resources to students and CruiserAlert™, high priority and emergency mass notification system.

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Westmoreland County Community College Activates CruiserAlert Three Times in Two Days

"We had a water main break on October 31st, and a bomb scare with a later 'all clear' on November 1st. The system worked like a charm.... Since then, we've seen a surge in subscriptions to the service."

Randy Finrock, Director of Institutional Research/Data Services, WCCC

Challenge: A dispersed commuter campus

In an emergency, getting the word out on a commuter-college campus can be cumbersome at best. Failure to notify students, faculty and staff of class cancellations or campus closures can not only result in unnecessary travel and a costly waste of gasoline, but also jeopardize the safety of those who inadvertently end up in harm's way. When the tragic shootings at Virginia Tech in April 2007 made student security a critical issue for colleges and universities nationwide, finding a fast and effective emergency alert system became an urgent priority for Westmoreland County Community College (WCCC).

Located on a rural 80-acre campus about 36 miles southeast of Pittsburgh, Pa., WCCC serves nearly 6,000 full- and part-time students in three counties. Students commute up to 60 miles to attend classes at the four main-campus buildings in Youngwood and seven off-campus education centers in New Kensington, Export, Waynesburg, Indiana, Latrobe, Belle Vernon and Smithton.

WCCC's emergency communications plan called for activation of a phone chain among the staff and 425 full- and part-time faculty. If just one person broke the chain, dozens of people could remain unaware of the emergency situation. As back-up, a voice message from the main campus switchboard alerted anyone who called into the college for information. Announcements posted on the WCCC home page ([HYPERLINK "http://www.wccc.edu"](http://www.wccc.edu) www.wccc.edu) and CampusCruiser portal also informed those who visited online.

Unless students, faculty and staff received a phone call or were actively looking for information about weather alerts, class cancellations and other urgent news, they would be unaware of a potentially life-threatening situation. WCCC clearly needed a more proactive approach to emergency communications.

Solution: Simultaneous text messaging

As a CampusCruiser customer since 2002, WCCC already had in place a secure communications portal that the college branded as "CampusConnections." The web-based community allows students, faculty, administrators, alumni and parents to interact, collaborate and share information about classes and campus life. Because it is integrated with WCCC's Datatel Colleague software, the portal gives authorized administrators access to the full database of students, faculty and staff.

In August 2007, Timecruiser Computing Corporation contacted WCCC with news about

the latest enhancement to CampusCruiser – CruiserAlert. The high-priority and emergency alert messaging system would enable WCCC to broadcast messages simultaneously to all subscribers via mobile phone, email and RSS feed. Available as either a standalone service or an integrated component of CampusCruiser, CruiserAlert was priced below the dollar amount that could be approved by WCCC's president without going to the board of directors. The decision to implement the service was nearly instantaneous.

Within 24 hours of receiving an approved purchase order, Timecruiser had set up CruiserAlert and activated the software-as-service account in time for the start of Fall 2007 classes on August 23rd. WCCC designated six administrators who would be authorized to issue high-priority and emergency alerts. The intuitive interface required no special training, and they were immediately at ease with the process for sending a message – simply open a screen, enter the text, select recipient groups and send. In addition to CruiserAlert's default setting for Emergency Channel messages, WCCC set up five other alert channels: Commuter, Weather Advisory, Activities, Child Care Center and School Closure.

Students, faculty and staff who logged into their CampusCruiser accounts saw information about CruiserAlert and how to subscribe to the notification service. To subscribe, they simply entered their mobile phone numbers, alert preferences – text message, email and/or RSS feed – and communication channel choices.

Results: 2,500+ CruiserAlert subscribers

Within two months, about 26 percent of WCCC students had subscribed to CruiserAlert. The vast majority preferred text messaging, which is the most popular mode of communication among college-age students. Older, non-traditional students preferred email notification. Subscriptions among all age groups skyrocketed after the system was put to the test three times in two days.

The first alert occurred on Oct. 31, 2007, when an early morning water main break directly in front of WCCC's entrance cut off the water supply to the campus. At 10 a.m., the administration decided to close the campus for the remainder of the day. The alert message went out to main-campus subscribers, and mobile phones began ringing. Anyone who hadn't subscribed to CruiserAlert was immediately curious about what was happening. Word of mouth spread.

The next day, on Nov. 1, a bomb threat on the main campus prompted administrators to notify students that classes would be delayed until further notice. Because the high-priority alert prevented so many students from going to their classes, a thorough search of campus buildings progressed without interference. An all-clear was issued at 2 p.m. that day.

In both cases, the secure communications were managed through the CampusCruiser portal. CruiserAlert enabled authorized administrators to quickly identify target groups who would receive alerts and assign priority levels to the messages. Based on their experience, administrators later composed pre-determined messages using a common dictionary of texting abbreviations. WCCC also designated back-up administrators who could take over if an administrator was unavailable to send an alert.

By the end of 2007, more than 40 percent of the campus community subscribed to CruiserAlert. A February 2008 upgrade to the service added voice messaging, as well as more public and targeted channels – features that would broaden its appeal. During the Spring 2008 semester, WCCC planned to boost subscriptions with a promotional campaign that included hallway posters and email blasts. Anyone who had not yet subscribed would be automatically invited to sign up every time they log on to CampusCruiser. By requiring portal users to accept or reject this invitation, WCCC would make it clear that emergency communications are a top priority, and everyone in the campus community is strongly advised to use CruiserAlert.

“CampusCruiser is a one-stop shop for students and faculty. We can access it from anywhere, anytime. I post my assignments there, and if students can't come to class, they can see the work. ... As a faculty member, I think it's wonderful. I can email my students if class is cancelled. When I have my own channel, I'll be able to notify them through CruiserAlert.”

Marlene Stillitano, Instructor, Office Technology/Web Design, WCCC