
Independent Assessment Report of the Emergency Alert System and Crisis Communications Capabilities



FINAL VERSION

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A part of GlobalOptions, Inc.**

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About James Lee Witt Associates:

Founded in 2001, James Lee Witt Associates (Witt Associates), a part of GlobalOptions Group, is a public safety and crisis management consulting firm based in Washington, D.C., with offices located throughout the country. Witt Associates has unrivaled experience and hands-on knowledge of emergency preparedness, response, recovery, and mitigation. Witt Associates bridges government agencies and non-profits with industry and citizens as they assist state and local governments to prepare for and recover from disasters and crisis.

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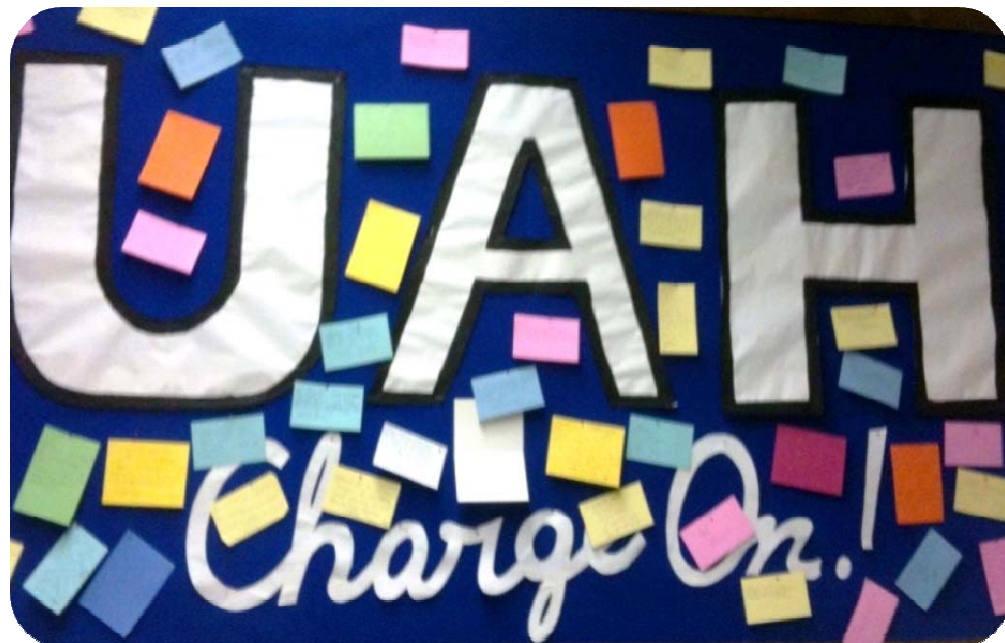


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Scope, Methodology, and Acknowledgements

Scope

The University of Alabama System retained Witt Associates to assist the Vice Chancellor for Financial Affairs and General Counsel in providing advice to the University of Alabama System concerning the emergency notification and crisis communications systems at the University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAHuntsville) campus as a whole, and also within the context of the February 12th, 2010 shooting incident. Although this independent assessment occurred as a result of the February 12th incident, it does not focus on the overall response to the incident. Rather, this assessment focuses on the general emergency notification and crisis communications systems, processes, and procedures at UAHuntsville, as well as their implementation during the February 12th incident.

Methodology

Through its work with colleges and universities across the country, Witt Associates understands that every institution has unique organizational structures, locations, histories, cultures, missions, and partnerships. Witt Associates focused on developing a report that reflects UAHuntsville's unique characteristics. Its findings and considerations are specific to UAHuntsville at this point in time.

In conducting this assessment, Witt Associates reviewed several documents, including the UAHuntsville Emergency Management Plan, the UAHuntsville Emergency Procedures Handbook, the vendor-hosted emergency alert system documents and reports, UAHuntsville policies and procedures, and after-action reports provided by UAHuntsville. Witt Associates also reviewed relevant Alabama and federal laws, requirements, and regulations and examined national practices, reports, and trends, including reports related to other universities and incidents, such as the active shooter incidents at Virginia Tech and Northern Illinois University.

Witt Associates also conducted a series of in-depth interviews with UAHuntsville administrators, faculty, staff, and students. Faculty and staff members interviewed included members of the Staff Senate, the Faculty Senate, the Policy Group, and the Emergency Management Operations Group (EMOG), as well as individuals outside of these groups that represented all administrative levels of faculty and staff. Students interviewed were chosen by the Dean of Students and consisted of students of all ages and academic classes. Residence Assistants were also represented in the student groups interviewed. These interviews were scheduled with individuals on the UAHuntsville campus upon suggestion from Witt Associates.

Additionally, the UAHuntsville President issued a public request for interview subjects so that anyone within the campus community who wanted to express concerns about the UAHuntsville emergency notification system could do so for this assessment. The interviews consisted of standardized questions that were created to elicit responses specific to the emergency notification and crisis communication systems at UAHuntsville, as well as in the context of the February 12th incident.

In order to organize and analyze the information and data, Witt Associates applied its expertise in the fields of higher education safety, security, and emergency management. The team also referenced findings and recommendations from nationally recognized experts, organizations, and reports.

Acknowledgements

Witt Associates wants to acknowledge the assistance and guidance of Ray Hayes, University of Alabama System Vice Chancellor for Financial Affairs, who served as the client project manager for this engagement; Bert Ragsdale, who was instrumental in setting up interviews with key stakeholders; Doris Ruddle, who scheduled several on-campus interviews and provided administrative support for Witt Associates; and all of the faculty, staff, and students interviewed for the assessment who were very forthcoming and honest in their opinions and thoughts. The UAHuntsville campus community was a very gracious host.

Finally, Witt Associates recognizes the extraordinary actions and efforts of those involved from UAHuntsville, Madison County, and the City of Huntsville during the February 12th incident and in the days that followed. They worked diligently, and in hazardous and extremely challenging conditions, to return UAHuntsville and the surrounding community back to normal operations. They performed their response actions admirably and effectively.

Executive Summary

The University of Alabama in Huntsville (UAHuntsville) has made a concerted effort to improve the safety and security of the campus in recent years. This effort has included enhancements to the emergency notification and crisis communications systems used at UAHuntsville, including the implementation of a vendor-hosted emergency alert system that widely disseminates emergency messages to the campus population. UAHuntsville emergency notification and crisis communications were recently tested during an extreme act of workplace violence. On February 12, 2010, a UAHuntsville faculty member allegedly shot and killed three UAHuntsville faculty members and wounded two additional faculty members and one staff member during a Biological Sciences faculty meeting in the University's Shelby Center for Science and Technology.

Following the incident, the University of Alabama System engaged Witt Associates to conduct an independent assessment of UAHuntsville's emergency notification and crisis communications systems.¹ This assessment incorporated the systems as a whole, not just specifically how they were utilized during the February 12th incident. However, the incident was used to gather contextual evidence in order to highlight real-time challenges and successes of the systems.

This report does not evaluate the overall response to the February 12th incident. Rather, it pertains to the emergency notification and crisis communications systems in place at UAHuntsville and how they were used during the February 12th incident. It examines the successes of these systems and how they can be improved in the future to enhance safety and security on the UAHuntsville campus. In order to determine the findings and create recommendations for this report, Witt Associates conducted extensive interviews with UAHuntsville administrators, faculty, staff, and students and reviewed plans, procedures, reports, and other documents pertinent to the emergency notification and crisis communications systems at UAHuntsville.

¹ For the purposes of this report, emergency notification is defined as the information or warning message disseminated immediately following an emergency to alert recipients of a threat that requires action to protect life safety and health; and later, the issuance of an "all clear" message if warranted. Crisis communications is defined as non-urgent information detailing important aspects of the incident, as well as required public action, that is distributed to the campus community and external stakeholders (such as the media and general public) following an emergency.

The February 12th incident offers an opportunity for UAHuntsville to review its policies and procedures, and improve future response to emergencies. The incident brought forth several challenges and issues as well as successes implemented by the University. With regards to emergency notification and crisis communications, the incident emphasized the need for clear emergency notification and crisis communications plans, policies, and procedures with clarified roles and responsibilities; an official university information source that is regularly updated throughout an emergency; and a multi-layered emergency notification and crisis communication suite of tools and methods for wide dissemination of information and the infrastructure to support these systems.

The following narrative provides a summary of the successes, major findings, and major recommendations described in detail within this report.

Successes

UAHuntsville performed admirably and exemplary in many ways during the February 12th incident. Additionally, UAHuntsville has worked diligently to improve emergency notification and crisis communications in recent years. Below are several successful emergency notification and crisis communications processes and procedures implemented at UAHuntsville.

Emergency Notification

- UAHuntsville spent considerable time and effort choosing a vendor-hosted emergency alert system. The chosen system is an effective tool for issuing emergency notification messages. UAHuntsville updates and tests the system regularly.
- UAHuntsville has taken the initiative to create pre-scripted emergency notification messages, and has imported them into the vendor-hosted emergency alert system.
- UAHuntsville's warning process for severe weather has been exceptionally effective.
- Public address systems exist in some campus buildings and UAHuntsville is considering implementing a campus-wide public address system, including both indoor and outdoor speakers.
- UAHuntsville has established effective relationships with external responders and stakeholders that will enhance future emergency notification efforts.

Crisis Communications

- UAHuntsville has an excellent relationship with local media outlets and engaged them immediately during the February 12th incident. UAHuntsville successfully relayed

information to the media throughout the event and media expectations were made clear at the outset of the incident. Additionally, UAHuntsville recognized the need for and established a media staging area so that information could be disseminated in an organized manner from a centralized location through established points of contact.

- Students felt well-informed about the February 12th incident in the days and weeks following the event. Many mentioned the dedicated February 12th incident news website as very helpful and informative.
- UAHuntsville's Policy Group met regularly throughout the February 12th incident and its aftermath to discuss and vet crisis communications messages prior to dissemination to the campus community.

Major Findings

UAHuntsville has faced challenges with its emergency notification and crisis communication systems not uncommon at universities across the country. The February 12th incident exacerbated these challenges. Several of these challenges were brought to light during Witt Associates' assessment. These are described below as they pertain to the emergency notification system and the crisis communications system at UAHuntsville.

Emergency Notification

- While UAHuntsville has begun to formalize emergency plans for the University, no clear, officially adopted and practiced procedures and protocols exist for emergency notification. Activation protocols for issuing emergency notification messages are not currently defined or understood, neither by those who implement the system nor by those who receive information. Lack of defined policies, protocols, and procedures elicits challenges during an emergency response because roles of responders in the emergency notification process are unclear.
- While UAHuntsville has in place a very effective vendor-hosted emergency alert system for widely disseminating immediate life safety emergency notification messages to the university community in times of crisis, this system was not utilized to issue an immediate emergency notification message during the February 12th incident. Rather, it was used to disseminate crisis communications messages containing non-urgent information about the incident to the campus community after the initial threat of the incident had passed. Additionally, only two individuals currently have the authority to activate the vendor-hosted emergency notification system. This authority and capability is centralized within the UAHuntsville Police Department and the number of individuals able and trained to initiate

an emergency message through the system is sufficiently limited and non-redundant, which compromises the system's operational utility.

- Existing emergency notification methods at UAHuntsville cover many user groups; however not all user groups within the campus community are accessed in an emergency with the existing tools. Furthermore, the percentage of the campus population utilizing the electronic emergency alert system is low due to insufficient user sign up and lack of exercising the optional notification methods included in the system.

Crisis Communications

- A formal and officially adopted campus crisis communications plan does not yet exist.
- The organizational structure for information flow, both internally to the campus community and externally to University partners, is not clearly defined. This lack of organizational structure for information flow and crisis communications has caused tension and confusion, and in some instances duplicate and/or inconsistent efforts, especially during emergencies when the release of official information from the University is critical.
- The mode(s) and/or location(s) of displaying/distributing crisis communications messages to the campus community have not been formalized, and the campus community has not been effectively educated about the methods that will be employed to issue official UAHuntsville crisis communication messages. UAHuntsville faculty, staff, and students are unclear about where to obtain official crisis communications messages during an emergency. Furthermore, the process for updating existing crisis communications methods is not clearly defined.
- The existing information technology infrastructure at UAHuntsville is not adequate to support crisis communications operations. For example, the UAHuntsville website, which is perceived by the UAHuntsville campus community as an official information source in times of crisis, cannot support high volumes of traffic.

Major Recommendations

Events such as the February 12th incident allow universities to evaluate and improve emergency processes and procedures for future responses. Below is an overview of recommendations described in detail in this report as they pertain to the findings summarized above.

Emergency Notification

- Develop procedures that detail processes, roles, and responsibilities for emergency notification at UAHuntsville. Develop protocols that adhere to the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (enforceable as of July 1, 2010) emergency notification requirements and allow for timely emergency notification to the campus community following any emergency that may compromise life safety and health. These protocols and procedures should be consistent with UAHuntsville’s Emergency Response Plan.
- Expand the ability to issue immediate emergency notification messages using the vendor-hosted emergency alert system. Ensuring redundancy of trained users will enable UAHuntsville to issue an immediate emergency notification message no matter the time, location, or type of incident. The roles and responsibilities of these users and the clear lines of authority for issuing an emergency notification message should be explicitly described in emergency notification plans, procedures, and protocols, and all users should be thoroughly trained on and exercise their roles in the procedure on a regular basis.
- Consider a multi-layered suite of emergency notification tools to reach as many members of the campus population as possible. Employ additional modes and methods of emergency notification on the UAHuntsville campus, such as public address systems in buildings, outdoor loudspeakers (sirens with voice capability), visual displays in populous areas, etc. Consider a mandatory or “opt-out” sign up for the vendor-hosted emergency alert system to increase usage of the system.
- Increase education and awareness of the UAlert system and implement education and training about UAHuntsville’s emergency notification system on a regular basis. Brand and market “UAlert” as the suite of tools utilized for emergency notification and crisis communications in an emergency and educate the campus community about all emergency notification and crisis communications methods. Use as many education methods as possible and engage faculty, staff, and student groups to educate the campus community.

Crisis Communications

- Create, formalize, and codify a crisis communications plan. This plan should include roles and responsibilities for crisis communications information dissemination, procedures for media involvement and staging during an event, and methods used to disseminate the official statements of the University during a crisis. Include roles and responsibilities of the Public Information Officer (PIO) in the plan. Train and exercise this plan with key players on a regular basis.

- Create an effective and logical organizational structure to activate and administer crisis communications and information dissemination during an emergency. Clearly define all players in the process and their roles and responsibilities.
- Define methods for information dissemination during a crisis. Similar to the emergency notification system, utilize a multi-layered approach to disseminating crisis communications, including the UAHuntsville homepage, the UAHuntsville emergency website, mass email, hotline and call centers, social media, online course software, etc. Streamline the process for disseminating information using all of these methods to ensure consistency and accuracy in crisis communications messages. Additionally, educate the campus community about where to obtain official University information during a crisis.
- Enhance information technology infrastructure on the UAHuntsville campus to ensure that it is able to support all methods used for crisis communications. If on-campus measures are ineffective for supporting these systems, consider soliciting support from off-site locations, partners, or vendors.

Conclusion

The February 12th incident serves as a valuable test case for UAHuntsville to evaluate and measure the effectiveness of the University's emergency notification and crisis communications systems. During that incident, UAHuntsville responders performed admirably under uniquely challenging and stressful conditions. Challenges with emergency notification and crisis communications were brought to light because of the extreme nature of the incident, providing for an opportunity to evaluate and improve upon overall capabilities and functions. The key recommendations in this report focus on building upon the emergency notification and crisis communications procedures in place at UAHuntsville, and improving them for future incidents. Adoption of the recommendations in this assessment will help UAHuntsville be better prepared to handle emergency notification and crisis communications for any incident it may face in the future.

Summary of Events

For a complete timeline of the events of the February 12th Incident, see Appendix C.

On February 12, 2010, a UAHuntsville faculty member allegedly shot and killed three UAHuntsville faculty members and wounded two more faculty and one staff person during a Biological Sciences faculty meeting on the third floor in the University's Shelby Center for Science and Technology. The alleged shooter was apprehended minutes later while attempting to leave the building.

The initial 9-1-1 call was placed to the Huntsville-Madison County 9-1-1 Center at approximately 3:57 p.m. UAHuntsville police received notification of a possible active shooter at approximately 3:58 p.m. UAHuntsville police officers were the first responders to arrive at the Shelby Center, and entered the building at approximately 4:00 p.m. Huntsville police officers began arriving moments later and quickly established inner and outer perimeters around the building and set up the tactical command post nearby. The alleged shooter was taken into custody at approximately 4:10 p.m. while attempting to leave the Shelby Center through the basement door.

Huntsville Police S.W.A.T. began a systematic search of the Shelby Center at approximately 4:12 p.m. to ensure there were no additional victims or suspects in the building. At 4:50 p.m., a message was issued to the campus community with information about the shooting and campus closure. This message was also placed on the UAHuntsville homepage at approximately 5:00 p.m. At 5:30 p.m., a UAlert message was sent to the campus community via the vendor-hosted emergency alert system that described the Shelby Center as secure with the suspect in custody. An "all clear" was issued for all other buildings at this time.

At 5:35 p.m. UAHuntsville officials received official word from police that no students were involved in the incident. The S.W.A.T. search was completed at approximately 5:45 p.m., at which time UAHuntsville officials received official notification that the building was clear, there were three fatalities, three wounded, and no other victims were in the building. At approximately 6:05 p.m., the University President sent an email to the campus community informing them that no students had been involved in the shooting. UAHuntsville and City of Huntsville officials held the first joint press conference at 6:30 p.m., officially announcing the three fatalities and three wounded, but did not release names at that time. At 7:34 p.m. UAHuntsville officials received confirmation of the identities of the deceased. This information was released to the media during a 9:00 p.m. press conference.

This summary was provided by the UAHuntsville Emergency Planner.

Overview of Emergency Notification and Crisis Communications Systems

Emergency notification and crisis communications play a significant role in any emergency response effort, with communication consumers spanning from victims and responders to the media and general public. Emergency notification and crisis communications are defined below as they were used for this assessment and according to higher education emergency management national best practices.

The purpose of *emergency notification* is to alert the community of an incident that may compromise safety and health. The emergency notification is sent once a threat is verified, and in a time frame that allows people who may be affected by the threat to take appropriate action to prevent or mitigate injury or loss of life. The Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (enforceable as of July 1, 2010) requires institutions of higher education to have procedures in place to immediately notify the campus community upon confirmation of a significant emergency or dangerous situation that may cause an immediate threat to the health or safety of the campus community (unless issuing a notification will compromise response efforts). For the purposes of this report, emergency notification is defined as the information or warning message disseminated immediately following an emergency to alert recipients of a situation that requires action to protect life safety and health, and later the issuance of an “all clear” message if warranted.

The purpose of *crisis communications* is to disseminate timely, accurate, and relevant information to a larger audience than just persons directly affected by the incident, or to the general public as warranted by demand. Crisis communication is most effective when timely, accurate, official information is disseminated to consumers by an appropriate authority as quickly as possible following an incident. This allows for the organization to maintain trust and confidence with the consumer, dispel rumors, and initiate a suitable process for public information management. For the purposes of this report, crisis communications is defined as non-urgent information detailing important aspects of the incident, as well as required public action, that is distributed to the campus community and external stakeholders (such as the media and general public) following an emergency.

Emergency Notification at UAHuntsville

University Police holds the primary responsibility for emergency notification at UAHuntsville. University Police utilizes a vendor-hosted emergency alert system to communicate incident-related information to its users. Branded as UAlert, UAHuntsville maintains a web site

(<http://www.uah.edu/ualert/>) that serves as both an educational tool and mechanism for faculty, staff, and students to access the vendor-hosted emergency alert system. Upon hire or matriculation, employees and students are briefed on the system by University public safety staff with regard to the system's existence, use, and registration options. Each official University e-mail address is registered in the UAlert system and emergency notifications can be sent to all University email addresses. Through the UAlert website, University faculty, staff, and students can input additional contact information, such as additional telephone numbers and personal e-mail addresses, to have the option to receive official University notifications via phone (cell or landline) through voicemail and text messages or via e-mail addresses other than the one provided by UAHuntsville. The UAlert system is activated several times each year, primarily for weather threats (typically tornados).

Through education and public awareness efforts, and routine activations for severe weather threats, the campus community has a general understanding of the UAlert capability, as well as an expectation that the system offers a reliable means of emergency notification for all-hazards incidents.

Crisis Communications at UAHuntsville

Approximately 1.5 years ago, the University had a University Relations department in place. Crisis communications duties resided within the University Relations department. With change of leadership at UAHuntsville, the University Relations department was disbanded due to lack of funding. With the dissolution of the department, the responsibility for crisis communications shifted to specific individuals in the university organizational structure rather than residing within a specific department. This remained true during the February 12th incident and is still true today. UAHuntsville officials are currently considering re-organizing crisis communications responsibilities to enhance the function within the campus organizational structure.

UAHuntsville has a close relationship with local media outlets and engages them quickly after an incident occurs on the campus. UAHuntsville employs personnel in several departments across campus that are skilled in media relations and community outreach who have been engaged for crisis communications during major incidents on the campus. The UAHuntsville homepage is a critical source of official University information and crisis communications are continuously placed on the homepage during an emergency situation. Additionally, UAHuntsville has the capacity to set up special websites dedicated to the emergency at hand. UAHuntsville officials also use a mass email list to send messages to the campus community.

Findings and Recommendations

This segment of the report describes in detail the findings and recommendations associated with the emergency notification and crisis communications systems assessment at UAHuntsville. The findings and recommendations listed in this section were gleaned from interviews conducted with administrators, faculty, staff, and students and by thorough document review. The findings and recommendations are divided into four sections, as follows:

- I. Emergency Notification
- II. Crisis Communications
- III. Training and Education
- IV. Roles and Responsibilities

Each section contains findings and recommendations. A finding is described first followed by a recommendation associated with that finding. Findings and recommendations are listed in no particular order.

I. Emergency Notification

UAHuntsville has made a concerted effort to improve emergency notification capabilities in recent years. UAHuntsville spent considerable time and effort choosing a vendor-hosted emergency alert system, which is an effective tool for issuing emergency notification messages. This system has been populated with pre-scripted notification messages and is updated and tested regularly. The use of this system by UAHuntsville personnel has been extremely successful in severe weather events. UAHuntsville has also implemented other emergency notification tools, such as public address systems in some campus buildings, and there are plans to move forward in installing public address systems in more campus buildings. UAHuntsville is also covered by the County's siren system. There are two sirens located on campus that sound in the event of a severe weather warning. UAHuntsville has also established very successful relationships with external responders that may assist in emergency notification.

Below are several ways UAHuntsville can add to its successes and improve emergency notification for the campus community.

Finding: No clear, officially adopted and practiced policies, procedures, and protocols exist for UAHuntsville’s emergency notification process. Lack of formalized emergency notification protocols and procedures has caused confusion in process and roles among emergency responders and has caused delays in issuing emergency notification messages.

Recommendation: Develop procedures that detail processes, roles, and responsibilities for emergency notification at UAHuntsville. Develop protocols that follow Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008 (enforceable as of July 1, 2010) emergency notification requirements and allow for timely emergency notification to the campus community following any emergency that may compromise life safety and health. These protocols must ensure that emergency notification messages will go out in any situation where a threat is verified and immediate, and where issuing the notification will not compromise the response. Procedures and protocols that detail the process and authority for issuing emergency notification messages will ensure that timely, appropriate, and correct messages are issued in life-threatening situations. These procedures and protocols should be consistent with UAHuntsville’s Emergency Response Plan.

“An earlier notification – even if it contained few specifics – would have been helpful. The unknown scared many people and a message may have calmed their fears. Not knowing resulted in so much chaos and hysteria.”

–Staff member (leadership position)

Finding: The vendor-hosted emergency alert system was not utilized to issue an immediate emergency notification message during the February 12th incident. Rather, it was used to disseminate crisis communications messages containing non-urgent information about the incident to the campus community.

Recommendation: Use the vendor-hosted emergency alert system strictly for immediate emergency notification messages necessary for life safety instructions and “all clear” notifications. Use crisis communications tools and methods to issue additional information about the situation.

Finding: Only two individuals on the UAHuntsville campus have the authority and are trained to issue an emergency message through the vendor-hosted emergency alert system. Both individuals reside in the University Police department. This caused a delay in issuing an immediate notification during the February 12th incident because both individuals were responding to the scene.

Recommendation: Create emergency notification protocols that clarify the lines of authority for issuing emergency notification messages through the vendor-hosted emergency alert system and expand the list of trained and authorized individuals who can use the system. Ensuring redundancy of trained users will enable UAHuntsville to issue an immediate emergency notification message no matter the time, location, or incident. Additional users should be trained and authorized to use the system within the Police Department. Additionally, while the authority to issue emergency notification messages should remain within University Police to ensure 24/7 coverage, UAHuntsville should consider training personnel external to University Police to ensure redundancy during emergencies requiring extensive police involvement or if trained users within University Police are unavailable or need assistance. Consider keeping trained users external to University Police on call 24/7 as well. Ensure sufficient staff is available for these functions within University Police and external to the department. Consider hiring additional University Police staff if necessary to accommodate the added responsibility.

“My immediate reaction was to send out a notification but the only two people who could do it were in the building as first responders so they couldn’t do it. This showed us a big flaw in our system. There definitely needs to be other people trained to use the system. “

–Emergency Management Operations Group member

Finding: A method to immediately alert individuals without access to electronic forms of communication and visitors to the campus does not exist for the entire campus. Public address systems exist in certain buildings on campus but not in all campus buildings. The procedure for who can use the existing public address systems to issue emergency notification messages is unclear.

Recommendation: Increase the multi-layered capability of UAHuntsville’s emergency notification system by expanding the network of public address systems throughout the campus and utilize as a way to obtain the immediate attention of all persons in a building or specific area of the campus, including visitors and those without access to the vendor-hosted emergency alert system. Consider installing outdoor vocal sirens as well to give individuals outdoors specific instructions in an emergency. Additional methods such as visual displays, keeping in mind Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) compliance, should also be considered. Develop procedures for the use of comprehensive multi-layered

systems, and strive for a central access point for all systems. Ensure authorized university staff members utilize the systems, and are trained in how to do so.

“The system is effective only to the extent that people sign up to receive emergency notifications.”

–Staff member

Finding: Approximately 19% of the campus population has submitted additional contact information besides their UAHuntsville email address into the vendor-hosted emergency alert system. Therefore, only a small percentage of individuals in the campus population receive emergency notification messages in addition to

messages sent to their campus email addresses. Key partners in the campus community, such as the Bevil Center employees and continuing education students, do not have access to receiving alerts through the vendor-hosted emergency alert system.

Recommendation: Increase the percentage of students, faculty, and staff registered in the vendor-hosted emergency alert system by making sign up mandatory or implementing an “opt out” procedure, where the no-action default keeps an individual’s information in the system. Additionally, increase education efforts to market the system among students, faculty, staff, parents, key partners, and visitors (see *Training and Education* section).

Finding: The vendor-hosted emergency alert system is populated with pre-scripted messages that address common/critical emergencies and/or situations that may occur. However, more pre-scripted messages may need to be added to the system.

Recommendation: Vet all pre-scripted messages in the vendor-hosted emergency alert system for conciseness and clarity. Ensure that all messages are in the same format and branded with “UAlert” to provide familiarity of emergency messages throughout the campus community. Input pre-scripted messages into the vendor-hosted emergency alert system for additional scenarios and situations. Formalize the responsibility for crafting pre-scripted messages. Involve the Policy Group and Emergency Management Operations Group (EMOG) when vetting messages if possible. Pre-scripted messages created by other universities may be used as examples where appropriate, but consistency with UAHuntsville emergency notification protocols will be crucial.

Finding: Many university community members associate the UAlert system exclusively with tornados and severe weather.

Recommendation: Brand the vendor-hosted emergency alert system, and all other emergency notification and crisis communications tools, as a multi-layered, all-hazards emergency alert and crisis communications system called UAlert. Ensure all UAHuntsville

faculty, staff, and students know that the UAAlert system will be used for all emergencies for which a verified, immediate threat exists.

II. Crisis Communications

UAHuntsville has many talented individuals capable of serving in crisis communications roles. UAHuntsville also has an excellent relationship with local media outlets, which were engaged immediately by the University following the February 12th incident. Additionally, students felt well-informed about the February 12th incident in the days and weeks following the event. The University's Policy Group met regularly throughout the February 12th incident and its aftermath to discuss and vet crisis communications messages prior to dissemination to the campus community.

Below are several ways UAHuntsville can add to its successes and improve crisis communications processes and procedures.

Finding: A formal and officially adopted crisis communications plan for campus does not yet exist.

Recommendation: Create, formalize, and codify a crisis communications plan. This plan should include roles and responsibilities for crisis communications information dissemination, procedures of media involvement and staging during an incident, and methods used to disseminate the official statements of the university. Once finalized and approved, add these plans and procedures to the UAHuntsville Emergency Management Plan. Train and exercise this plan with key players on a regular basis.

“There has to be a protocol so that all the pertinent players know what is going on.”

–Emergency Management Operations Group member

Finding: The organizational structure for information flow, both internally to the campus community and externally to University partners, is not clearly defined. This lack of organizational structure for information flow and crisis communications has caused tension and confusion, and in some instances duplicate and/or inconsistent efforts, especially during emergencies when the release of official information from the University is critical.

Recommendation: Create an effective and logical organizational structure to activate and administer crisis communications and information dissemination during an emergency. Clearly define all players in the process and their roles and responsibilities. Consider

assigning the crisis communications function to one department and identify who will be in charge of executing that function at UAHuntsville. During an incident, ensure one person serves in the role of the Public Information Officer (PIO) for the duration of the incident. The PIO is the individual assigned to manage all information distribution to the internal community and external public about the emergency. All official information released by the university about the event should be vetted and approved by the PIO.

Finding: During the February 12th incident, UAHuntsville was successful in engaging the media and releasing official information to the community through media outlets. While interaction with the media was coordinated through one person, the assignment of this role was not pre-determined. Additionally, media interaction proved challenging because of the lack of available staff to serve the public information function.

Recommendation: Continue to engage the media during emergencies and use media outlets as another method of crisis communications to the campus community. Release official messages to the media in a timely manner and pre-determine who will serve in the role of interacting with and coordinating the media during an incident. Include this designation in the Emergency Management Plan. Also include procedures in the plan for setting up a media staging area. Determine both indoor and outdoor locations for media staging areas, ensuring that the media staging area is not located in the incident command post or emergency operations center. Identify and pre-stage supplies ahead of time such as computers and office materials necessary for media operations. Organize staff support for the PIO considering skills necessary to create crisis communications messages and interact with media. One staff person should monitor information flow at all times, including the actual information that media outlets are releasing about the incident.

Finding: UAHuntsville utilized a PIO to interact with media during the February 12th incident; however, the individual assigned as the PIO was neither pre-determined nor documented as a trained and authorized PIO in the Emergency Management Plan. Procedures for PIO duties beyond media interaction are also not well-defined in UAHuntsville's plans and procedures.

Recommendation: Add a Public Information Officer (i.e. an individual responsible for all information flow about an incident to the internal community and external public) to the EMOG and ensure that the PIO role is clearly defined. Ensure that the designated PIO has a direct link to the Policy Group during emergencies. All information released to the public and campus community should be approved by this person. Assign staff to support

the PIO, and ensure that each PIO staff member has appropriate crisis communications training.

Finding: UAHuntsville faculty, staff, and students are unclear about where to obtain official crisis communications messages. After an emergency, it is unclear where to find official messages.

Recommendation: Define methods for information dissemination during a crisis. Similar to the emergency notification system, utilize a multi-layered approach for disseminating crisis communications, including the UAHuntsville homepage, the UAHuntsville emergency page (linked from UAHuntsville homepage), mass email, hotline and call centers, social media, online course software, the student newspaper, desktop notifications, radio stations, and the community police officer in residence halls. Streamline the process for disseminating information using all of these methods to ensure consistency and accuracy in crisis communications messaging. Additionally, educate the campus community on where to obtain official University information during a crisis.

Finding: Sending a mass email to the campus community through the campus email system using pre-created student and employee lists is an essential way to communicate with faculty, staff, and students following a crisis. However, there are no official processes in place to create and send an official email to the campus community through the campus email system. Additionally, there is no control over the mass email list and no defined authority for individuals that can send mass email messages through the campus email system.

“It’s an adventure to try to send a mass email to the campus community and it shouldn’t be.”

–Policy Group member

Recommendation: Streamline the process for sending mass emails to the campus community through the campus email system. Define the authority for sending such emails, and implement access control measures to the mass email lists. Include procedures in the crisis communications plan that describe who can write and send mass emails, how to track and store sent messages, and how to vet all messages through the PIO. This procedure should be followed for all types of emergencies.

Finding: The existing information technology (IT) infrastructure at UAHuntsville is not adequate to support crisis communications operations. For example, although the UAHuntsville homepage is perceived as an official and main source of crisis communications information for the campus community and external interests, the IT infrastructure cannot support high volumes of traffic to the UAHuntsville website.

Recommendation: The University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa) Deputy Chief Information Officer (CIO) recently completed a *General IT Assessment* for UAHuntsville. The report contained several key recommendations that should be implemented concerning the people, processes, and technologies necessary to improve IT functions at UAHuntsville. Recommendations in the *General IT Assessment*, including necessary investments in personnel and equipment, are imperative for conducting crisis communications during an emergency. UAHuntsville should ensure that adequate infrastructure is in place to handle high volumes of traffic to the UAHuntsville homepage, which could include redirect service for the homepage with infrastructure located off campus to activate in an emergency.

“The homepage is a critical place to get official information any time- in an emergency and not in an emergency.”

–Policy Group member

Finding: According to the campus community, the UAHuntsville website is perceived as an official source of information during emergencies. Roles and responsibilities for updating the homepage and other emergency websites in an emergency are unclear.

Recommendation: Define roles and responsibilities for updating the homepage and other emergency information websites in an emergency. This process

should be consistent with the process used to update other methods for issuing crisis communications and all posted information should be vetted through the PIO. Roles for maintaining the website infrastructure, and for maintaining the “look and feel” of the website, should be clearly defined and reside in separate departments. Personnel who can update the homepage should be available on a 24/7 basis. Additionally, consider adding to the UAHuntsville homepage a link that goes directly to the emergency information site. For example, a new link with the address www.uah.edu/emergency could be created or the UAlert site could serve as the location where all emergency information is posted.

Finding: While UAHuntsville has developed pre-scripted messages for the vendor-hosted emergency alert system for emergency notification, pre-scripted messages for crisis communications have not been developed.

Recommendation: Develop pre-scripted messages for crisis communications and press releases about common events such as campus closure, class cancellation, and detailed emergency instructions not released in initial emergency notification messages.

Finding: The call center put together after the February 12th incident worked very well for communicating to the campus community and the public. However, the call center procedure was ad hoc and lacked structure. Students were asked to answer phones at the call center in the aftermath of the incident.

Recommendation: Add official procedures to the Emergency Management Plan that allow for the set up and maintenance of a call center after a major incident. The call center is an essential part of emergency response at UAHuntsville and should be made a priority in emergency plans and procedures. Ensure that sufficient personnel are available to staff the call center, and avoid using students to answer phones unless properly trained in performing specific crisis communications functions.

III. Training and Education

UAHuntsville has conducted several tabletop exercises in recent years and regularly tests the vendor-hosted emergency alert system. Each year, UAHuntsville promotes the UAlert system and encourages sign up via email and through new student orientation sessions and employee orientation. Below are several ways UAHuntsville can further improve its training and education program for the emergency notification and crisis communications systems.

Finding: UAHuntsville faculty, staff, and students are unclear about where to obtain official crisis communications messages. During an emergency, it is unclear where to find official messages. Faculty, staff, and students are also unsure about what to do when they receive an emergency notification or crisis communications message. Additionally, faculty, staff, and students have not been educated on realistic expectations regarding when emergency notification messages will be issued by the campus.

Recommendation: Increase education and awareness of emergency notification and crisis communications methods, and implement education and training about these systems on a regular basis. Brand and market “UAlert” as UAHuntsville’s emergency management and crisis communications system, including all methods for distributing information. Use as many education methods as possible (such as websites, mailings, booths at student fairs, sessions at orientation, the

“I would have given my phone number but I was never asked. I definitely would have put in my phone number because I never get on my email—maybe 3-4 times a week—but I’m on my phone every 10 minutes.”

—Student

student newspaper, class syllabi, colored flip charts, RA training programs, building coordinators, etc.) and engage faculty, staff, and student groups to educate the campus community about the emergency notification system, keeping in mind the different stakeholder groups and target audiences. Teach faculty, staff, and students where to obtain official university information and how to respond to emergency notification messages. Education should also include the realistic expectations of the system from the point of view of individuals receiving emergency messages, including when they will receive emergency notification messages and when they will not. Engage parents in training as well, and consider mailing information about emergency procedures to students' permanent addresses. Incorporate an all-hazards point of view in the trainings, and ensure community members know that UAlert will be used not only for severe weather threats, but for all emergency incidents requiring immediate notification.

"I think we need to be repeatedly trained on what to do in this type of incident."

–Faculty member

Finding: Students look to their professors for instructions during an emergency; however, faculty and staff in leadership positions are unsure of how to respond to emergency situations.

Recommendation: Create specialized training for faculty and staff in leadership positions. Include training on emergency notification and crisis

communications, as well as response steps to take in an emergency. Incorporate training into regular staff and faculty meetings, and allow easy access to training, such as through the UAHuntsville website.

Finding: While UAHuntsville has conducted several tests of the vendor-hosted emergency alert system, a test of the entire emergency notification system and crisis communications system has not yet occurred.

Recommendation: Conduct a full test of all emergency notification and crisis communications methods. For example, test in real time the process of sending out messages via the vendor-hosted emergency alert system and the mass email list while updating the homepage and other crisis communications methods. Conduct these full tests of the system on a regular basis.

"If one of the outcomes of the disaster is that we establish the processes, infrastructure, and capabilities that will establish a high tech communications system for the university, that will be a benefit of what happened."

–Administrator

Finding: UAHuntsville has held several tabletop exercises to practice emergency response; however, many key stakeholders have not been involved in past exercises. Furthermore, there is no formal emergency exercise program in place.

Recommendation: Formalize an emergency exercise program for UAHuntsville personnel to regularly practice emergency procedures, including emergency notification and crisis communications procedures. Include all key stakeholders in exercises, especially the Policy Group and the EMOG.

IV. Roles and Responsibilities

UAHuntsville emergency operations and response staff performed admirably during the February 12th incident. UAHuntsville has a comprehensive draft Emergency Management Plan that describes the basic roles and responsibilities of key university personnel, including the Policy Group and the EMOG. Below are several ways UAHuntsville can work to clarify emergency response roles and responsibilities as they pertain to emergency notification and crisis communications.

“To move forward, we need formalization and standardization of an Emergency Management structure that has the authority to get things done. This is so important to maintain the University’s viability.”

–Emergency Management Operations Group member

Finding: The emergency management structure, roles, and responsibilities at UAHuntsville, in both preparedness tasks and response operations, including its authority and relationship to other campus departments, is not clearly defined, vetted, or accepted.

Recommendation: Create a comprehensive emergency management structure for the UAHuntsville campus. Clearly define the emergency management structure for the campus including the roles and responsibilities of all staff members involved in planning and preparedness efforts, response and recovery operations, administration, emergency

notification, and crisis communications. Define the authority of emergency management for the campus and promote buy-in at all levels. In the Emergency Management Plan, describe the emergency management structure and the organization of pertinent operational departments on campus in relation to emergency preparedness and response. Streamline access from pertinent stakeholder departments to the emergency management function. Delineate the roles and responsibilities of all personnel involved in the emergency management structure, including planning and response roles. Utilize

emergency management staff efficiently and effectively during emergency response operations.

Finding: UAHuntsville has established a Policy Group and an Emergency Management Operations Group (EMOG) at UAHuntsville, both of which are expected to be involved in an emergency. However, the roles of the Policy Group and the EMOG are unclear as they pertain to emergency preparedness tasks and response operations. Several EMOG members are unaware they are a part of the EMOG. Additionally, leadership and coordination of each group is unclear during emergency response. The lack of well-defined procedures for these groups may hinder emergency notification and crisis communications tasks.

“There should be a lead person of the EMOG. That person should stand up the group and advise them on what to do.”
–Emergency Operations Group Member

“I didn’t know I was a member of the EMOG.”
–Emergency Operations Group Member

Recommendation: Solidify the roles and responsibilities of the members of the Policy Group and EMOG in developing strategies for emergency preparedness and operational tasks and in an emergency situation. Both groups should meet and participate in tabletop exercises and training on a regular basis so that members are aware of responsibilities and pertinent emergency management issues facing the campus. One pre-determined individual should act as the coordinator for the Policy Group and one pre-determined individual should act as the coordinator for the EMOG. Each coordinator should remain responsible for gathering the groups on a regular basis during non-emergency times and notifying and organizing group members about response actions during emergencies. A clear line of communication should exist between the two groups, both in non-emergency times and during crisis situations.

Finding: Residence Assistants (RAs) played a significant role in alerting students in residence halls about the February 12th incident.

Recommendation: Use RAs for emergency notification to the extent possible but ensure all RAs receive appropriate training for emergency notification and response roles.

Finding: The process for notifying essential senior officers and emergency response personnel (i.e. the Policy Group and the Emergency Management Operations Group) as well as the University of Alabama System, in an emergency is unclear and has not been documented in a procedure. Furthermore, there is no process in place for notifying senior staff with instructions for responding to the emergency, beyond an initial campus-wide emergency notification message.

“One of the questions that came to my mind was whether or not we have a system to notify the crisis management team, separately and apart from the communications system for the campus at large.”

–Policy Group member

Recommendation: Create methods and procedures for notifying the Policy Group and EMOG. Consider using methods such as call groups on mobile phones, call trees, mass email and text messaging contact lists, etc. Consider creating procedures for notifying deans as well. Use these procedures and methods to notify pertinent stakeholders about the emergency as well as providing clear instructions for where these individuals should report if applicable.

“I think all of us need to have a better understanding of our responsibilities.”

–Emergency Operations Group Member

Finding: The role of the Information Technology department in emergency notification and crisis communications is unclear.

Recommendation: Clarify the role of the IT department in emergency notification and crisis communications procedures. Assign specific IT individuals to specific emergency notification and crisis communications tasks. Ensure the IT department

has access to the vendor that hosts the emergency alert system to coordinate system requirements for issuing emergency messages.

Finding: Housing staff issued a lock down for all residence halls during the February 12th incident. This decision was not officially communicated to the campus community.

Recommendation: Solidify the decision making process for locking down residence halls, and develop procedures on how this action is communicated to the campus community, Policy Group, and EMOG (and specifically the PIO).

Conclusion

The University of Alabama in Huntsville faced an unprecedented act of violence against faculty and staff on February 12, 2010. This incident and its aftermath propelled the University into an emergency response more complex than it had ever faced in its history. Emergency operations staff performed admirably throughout the entire incident.

Reviewing the events that unfolded during the February 12th incident is important because the incident stressed certain response systems and actions, including those involved in emergency notification and crisis communications. Like the Virginia Tech shootings in 2007 and the Northern Illinois University shootings in 2008, the February 12th incident has caused UAHuntsville to harness the emotion of the event to improve emergency response processes and procedures on the campus. UAHuntsville has already taken steps to improve the process of issuing emergency notification and crisis communications messages. Emergency management personnel have begun to revise procedures and create new plans to address challenges faced during the response to the February 12th incident. All of these actions, and the emergency notification and crisis communications assessment that has been described in this report, are outcomes of UAHuntsville's drive to emerge as a stronger, more prepared university.

UAHuntsville has the opportunity and capability to improve upon emergency notification and crisis communications procedures already in place. By creating plans and protocols for these procedures and defining roles and responsibilities within the emergency notification and crisis communications systems, UAHuntsville will continue to improve in these areas.

For emergency notification, UAHuntsville must continue to build a multi-layered approach, acquiring as many notification methods as possible that will reach the campus population immediately in any emergency situation. Additionally, UAHuntsville must educate the campus community about these systems to encourage or mandate sign up in the vendor-hosted emergency alert system. The February 12th incident proved the need for a known method of releasing official information from the University. Utilizing several crisis communications methods, and streamlining roles and responsibilities for issuing official crisis communications messages, will allow the University community to have access to important emergency information in a timely manner. Authority and roles and responsibilities for information flow must be defined and exercised for both the emergency notification and the crisis communications processes. A solidified emergency management structure on the campus will facilitate this.

To implement all of the recommendations contained in this report, UAHuntsville must make a commitment to add the organizational structure and appropriate information technology infrastructure necessary to support emergency notification and crisis communications for the campus.

Recommendations in this report were synthesized from a comprehensive set of interviews with a variety of campus community members. All faculty, staff, and students interviewed for this assessment engaged interviewers and recommended similar actions for improvement. Adoption of the recommendations in this report will allow UAHuntsville to improve its emergency notification and crisis communications systems for use in future emergencies.



Appendix A – Documents Reviewed for this Report

UAHuntsville Emergency Management Plan (DRAFT) dated December 2009
UAHuntsville Emergency Procedures Handbook (flip chart)
UAHuntsville: A Guide to Campus Safety
UAHuntsville Department of Public Safety Directive #480 – Disasters and Civil Disorder
UAHuntsville Emergency Notification System PowerPoint Presentation
UAHuntsville Campus Alert Implementation – UAlert PowerPoint Presentation
UAHuntsville Department of Public Safety – Crisis Notification PowerPoint Presentation
UAHuntsville Department of Public Safety – List of prebuilt scenarios for Immediate Delivery and Messages requiring modification before being sent
UAHuntsville Department of Public Safety – One page information sheet
Vendor-hosted emergency alert system Broadcast Analysis report for notification #4651381 sent February 12, 2010
UAHuntsville Emergency Notification System – Scope of Work and Requirements
Mass notification vendor list
RFP P0039 – Emergency Notification System
Evaluation and Award of Proposal P0039- Emergency Notification System
UAHuntsville - General IT Assessment
Emergency Communication Record
UAHuntsville Draft Emergency Notification Procedures
 Severe Weather
 Armed Assailment
 Active Shooter
Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008
UAHuntsville Website
News and media articles related to the February 12th incident

Appendix B – Master Timeline

This timeline was provided by the UAHuntsville Emergency Planner.

The incident – February 12, 2010 (times are approximate)

- 3:57 p.m. – 9-1-1 called received at the Huntsville-Madison County 9-1-1 Center
- 3:57 p.m. - Active shooter alert broadcast by 9-1-1 center to Huntsville Police
- 3:58 p.m. - UAHPD monitoring HPD radio traffic receives notification of active shooter
- 4:00 p.m. - UAHuntsville officers arrive on scene and enter building to assess situation
- 4:01-4:05 p.m. - HPD officers arrive on scene and begin to establish command post and inner and outer perimeters around building
- 4:04 p.m. – Ray Garner (public affairs) notifies university president
- 4:05 p.m. – University officials begin setting up command center in Madison Hall
- 4:10 p.m. – Student Housing issues lockdown order for all housing buildings
- 4:10 p.m. – Alleged shooter in custody
- 4:12 p.m. – UAHPD chief notifies university president
- 4:12 p.m. – S.W.A.T. teams begin systematic search of Shelby Center

Post-incident (times are approximate)

- 4:20 p.m. – Decision to close campus and cancel classes
- 4:50 p.m. – Email sent to campus confirming shooting, noting no danger, and announcing closure of campus
- 5:00 p.m. – Same message posted to UAHuntsville homepage
- 5:10 p.m. – UAHPD chief attempts to send UAlert – service provider unable to verify PIN
- 5:22 p.m. – UAHPD chief makes second attempt to sent UAlert
- 5:25 p.m. – Text from the email sent at 4:50 p.m. is posted to web site
- 5:30 p.m. – UAlert sent: Shelby Center secure, suspect in custody, and “all clear” for all other buildings
- 5:30 p.m. – Call center location identified (Charger Central), efforts underway to staff phones
- 5:30 p.m. – Counseling center begins operating in UC
- 5:35 p.m. – Notice placed on web site that no students involved
- 5:45 p.m. – Confirmation from law enforcement that Shelby Center is clear, no additional victims, confirm three dead
- 6:05 p.m. – Email sent to campus community: no students involved in the shooting
- 6:07 p.m. – Student housing notifies that they have counseling center operational
- 6:30 p.m. – Press conference
- 7:34 p.m. – Identities of deceased confirmed
- 9:00 p.m. – Press conference

Saturday, February 13, 2010

- 9:30 a.m. – First post-incident meeting of consequence management team
- 11:00 a.m. – Press Conference

Appendix C – Interview Questions

The following questions were developed by Witt Associates and asked to each person interviewed for this assessment.

1. Describe UAH's emergency notification process, procedures, and protocols.
2. Describe UAH's emergency notification modes/methods.
3. How is the university community educated about emergency notification processes and procedures? Do you think these education measures are effective?
4. How can faculty, staff, and students sign up for emergency notification messages? How are students, faculty, and staff entered into the emergency notification system? Is sign up required?
5. Who at UAH has the authority to issue emergency notification messages and how is this done?
6. Describe your role in the emergency notification process at UAH.
7. Do you think UAH has an effective emergency notification system and crisis communication system in place? Why or why not?
8. Do you think emergency notification and crisis communications could be improved at UAH? If so, in what way?
9. As it relates to the February 12th incident, describe your experience with the emergency notification process during the incident. (If directly involved with the process, describe the process' successes and failures that day. If not directly involved in the process, describe how you received notification, and your opinion of its timeliness and effectiveness.)
10. In your opinion, was the emergency notification process put into place during the Feb. 12th incident effective? Why or why not?

For those part of the process/response to the Feb 12th incident

1. In your opinion, did the situation warrant a mass notification to the campus community (i.e. not doing so would increase the likelihood of the situation causing an immediate threat to the health

and safety of students or staff on campus, or would have made the situation worse)? Are there situations in general where you think a mass emergency notification to the campus would not be necessary?

2. In your opinion, would issuing a mass emergency notification have compromised response efforts?
3. In your opinion, was an emergency notification to certain groups on campus necessary versus a mass notification to the entire campus?

For those NOT a part of the process/response to the Feb. 12th incident:

1. Do you think a mass notification to the campus was necessary in this situation? Are there any instances which you would not want to be notified or would not think it necessary to be notified through the emergency notification system?
2. Do you think UAH issued a timely emergency notification to the campus community?
3. Do you think the emergency notification procedure put into place during the Feb. 12th incident maintained the safety and security of the campus?

Please add any additional comments here.