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## Safe? Vendors court colleges

**TIM SIMMONS, Staff Writer**

For 60 days after the April shootings at Virginia Tech, Robert Bruce refused to let his security company make sales calls at colleges and universities.

The president of Saf-T-Net, a Raleigh company that makes emergency notification software, Bruce said it "lacked moral conscience" to take advantage of the tragedy.

He still thinks he was right, though he returned to a field that is now packed with competitors who are threatening to overwhelm school officials.

"It was similar to throwing a dead cow carcass into a pool of sharks," Bruce said of the way vendors descended on campuses. "I'm not kidding. It's disgusting, actually."

In higher education circles, discussions about campus safety will be partitioned into pre-Virginia Tech and post-Virginia Tech for years to come. On April 16, 32 people were killed when a student gunman went on a shooting rampage on campus, killing students, staff members and himself.

Since the shootings, administrators have gotten a sales pitch about the newest in surveillance and emergency notification systems nearly every week. Sometimes they get more than one a day.

"I have a never-ending stream of vendors," said Leslie Winner, a UNC system vice president and chairman of a systemwide safety task force. "UNC could easily spend tens of millions of dollars on efforts to improve safety, some with tenuous benefit."

In fairness to his competitors, Bruce said universities share some of the blame for the sales rush. Many schools responded to the shootings by immediately highlighting existing programs while promising to shore up weaknesses.

But the decentralized structure that encourages academic freedom is mostly a hindrance to vendors selling campus-wide products.

"You have all these colleges and deans, and they want different things," Bruce said. "It's like selling to 25 different companies at once. It's chaotic."

University officials realize there are problems with reaching as many as 40,000 people -- many teens and 20-somethings -- scattered across several colleges. But they aren't willing to create fortresses.

"Instead, you create a communication system with a lot of redundancies," said David Rainer, an associate vice chancellor at N.C. State University who oversees public safety. "There is no single way to reach everyone."

That means coordinating multiple warning systems from multiple vendors.

At UNC-Chapel Hill, for example, students can sign up for a service that provides text messages to cell phones with short, simple alerts. Provided through Rave Wireless of New York, it is part of a larger, three-year contract that costs more than \$100,000.



About 400 emergency phones, including this one in Wolf Village, are part of N.C. State's security network.  
Staff Photos by Juli Leonard

The university hopes to cover some of those costs by selling heavily discounted cell phones and plans to UNC-CH students, said Brian Payst, director of technology in the division of student affairs at UNC-CH. For those who don't have cell phones, the campus is installing sirens and public address voice systems. The siren system will cost about \$185,000 to install at UNC-CH. A similar system at NCSU will cost at least \$250,000.

Both approaches are good at getting students' attention, but they have obvious shortfalls.

"Text messages, for example, are really good at notifying people, but not good at all for explaining things," Payst said.

For those kind of details, schools can purchase software that will send out mass e-mail messages or refer people to Web sites. But both lack immediacy and have a tendency to crash during a crisis.

One possible solution from Digital Acoustics of Lake Forest, Ill., is a two-way audio system that uses existing Internet connections and wireless routers to connect classrooms, dorms and other areas on campus to central locations. The boxy units cost about \$300 each, but they can be used to talk with a single user or broadcast to hundreds of locations at once, said Chris Coffin, Digital Acoustics' CEO.

Video surveillance adds another layer of security -- and cost -- on campus. High-definition cameras cost about \$2,000 each and as much as \$500 to install, said Barry Walker, CEO of CoVi Technologies of Austin, Texas.

The cameras, which are also used at casinos and banks, provide images that are 16 times sharper than the grainy black and white pictures often distributed by police. Though it takes time to learn to integrate high-definition capabilities with existing surveillance systems, Walker thinks that the technology will prevail.

"If you can't use your video to identify a person's face or a license plate, what good is it?" he asked. "All you know is something happened at a certain time in a given area. We can do better."

But doing better can lead to a seemingly endless review of new products these days, and "you just can't afford to chase technology," Rainer said.

But after the shootings at Virginia Tech, administrators can't afford to ignore it, either.

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