

Warn of danger more quickly

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The massacre at Virginia Tech exposed just how behind the times many colleges are about communicating with students.

On most campuses, including Virginia Tech, e-mail is the preferred method of communication. But that assumes most students will be near enough to a computer to get a message in an emergency, and that school officials will act quickly. Perhaps one of the deadliest failures at Virginia Tech was the two-hour lag between the first incident and school officials' decision to actually send a message to students warning them of the danger.

A safer bet is for college boards and a commission set up by Virginia Gov. Timothy Kaine to recommend text messaging, rather than e-mail, as the preferred campus alert system.

Cell phones and portable devices like BlackBerrys have become ubiquitous in American culture, and especially on college campuses. In an emergency, they offer an unrivaled ease of communication

It's a view hundreds of schools, including Western Michigan University and Michigan State University, are embracing since the Virginia Tech shootings. Yes, there are costs involved. But the potential human costs of not exploring "texting" as a solid way to warn students may be greater.

One option worth exploring is whether colleges should be pushing for federal homeland security grants, much the way cities compete. The unique nature of college campuses — most are wide-open, easy targets — certainly suggest they should be eligible.

What's unquestionable is the need for colleges to give efficient technology a higher profile in emergency planning. America is home to too much technological know-how to ever again risk leaving students in danger for as long as Virginia Tech did.