Students must trust the source of emergency alerts in order to act quickly, new research shows

April 13 2012

(Phys.org) -- In the wake of the deadly shooting this month at Oikos University in Oakland, Calif., experts from the University at Buffalo offer perspectives from their research into ways to encourage students to immediately comply with "alert" messages sent during an on-campus emergency.

Researchers Raj Sharman, associate professor, and H. Raghav Rao, SUNY Distinguished Service Professor, both in the UB School of Management, have been studying campus-related shootings for the past three years as part of their research on extreme events, one of UB's strategic strengths.

Their goal was to identify critical factors that influence student responses to on-campus emergencies. The research focused on which communication channels were most effective in reaching students, and examined student attitudes toward emergency alerts, such as what students expect from alert notifications and what factors influenced their compliance with the alerts. Their research on this topic has been conditionally accepted in *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*.

The study's co-researchers were Joseph Brennan, associate vice president, University Communications, UB; Wencui Han, UB School of Management doctoral student; Swikriti Srivastava, UB School of

Management master's degree student; and Serkan Ada, assistant professor, Kahramanmaras Sutcu Imam University, Turkey.

The results, from surveys of 600 students and a dozen student focus groups, showed that students are more apt to immediately comply with emergency alert instructions (e.g. "shelter in place," or "evacuate the building") when they know and trust the source of the alert. When trust is lacking, students feel they must first verify the information with peers or known official sources of information before complying with alert, the research showed.

"In other words, if students believe the information is coming from a trustworthy source (a close friend, parent, professor or administrator such as university police chief), they are more likely to follow the directions given in the emergency alerts," Sharman says.

The research also showed that campus alert notifications are the best way for students to find out about an incident and what they should do. Also, campuses should use a variety of communication channels to reach students: text, email and social media.

Colleges and universities should continually work to improve their reach in these channels. When students become accustomed to receiving official notifications through these channels, they are more likely to trust emergency alerts and comply immediately with their directives, the researchers say.

"From a technology perspective, our research shows it's important for campus public safety officials to have a Twitter presence," says Rao. "That should become a trusted source for such emergency information. The number of followers for such a Twitter account would increase enormously during an emergency and allow for trusted word-of-mouth dissemination."

"No technology is perfect," Brennan cautions. "Instant, accurate information is not always possible, so students should use common sense and take steps to protect themselves even in the absence of official instructions."

Campuses should develop training exercises to get students to imagine situations where they would be placed in harm's way and would need to find escape strategies, the researchers say. This will allow them to be better prepared. Developing such exercises will be an area the research team also plans to investigate in the future.

Provided by University at Buffalo