MU officials continue to work out kinks in alert system

By Alan Burdziak

Thursday, April 23, 2015 at 2:00 pm

After four potentially dangerous events on or near campus within a week, University of Missouri officials are still working on improving the school’s alert system as issues with its use continue to garner criticism.

Representatives from several departments, including police, facilities, communications and vice chancellors, met Wednesday to discuss how the MU Alert system was used in the latest event — a bomb threat Tuesday night at the Student Center and Memorial Union — and other recent incidents. Alerts have gone out through the system after a manhunt ended with police shooting a suspect on campus April 15, two women reported a robbery near the university on Sunday and Columbia police investigated a shots-fired call near campus Tuesday night shortly after the bomb threat was cleared.

MU spokesman Christian Basi said officials agreed the MU Alert system was used properly during the bomb threat, despite criticism from students that they didn’t know what was happening.

Alerts for the bomb threat were posted on the MU Alert site and on Twitter. Text messages were not sent because police evacuated the two buildings immediately.

“Sending a text message would have alerted a large number of people unnecessarily when we already had information out there,” Basi said.

After the bomb threat, texts were sent to the approximately 55,000 system users to notify them about the shots-fired call, which ended up being a false alarm.

Depending on the operating system of the user’s phone, a message that said the situation was cleared either read “ALL CLEAR ???” or included upside-down and normal question marks. MU police Capt. Scott Richardson said the message was one of several templates that can be sent out via the alert system. A template is sent as soon as possible to notify people, and a second message is sent with more information and to refer people to the MU Alert website, Richardson said. The question-mark message was a glitch, he said.
“We’re working with our IT to make sure it doesn’t happen again,” Richardson said.

MU Chancellor R. Bowen Loftin released a statement Thursday morning about why phone alerts were not sent regarding the bomb threat.

“Typically, text alerts, and/or automated phone calls, are sent when university officials are aware of a significant emergency or dangerous situation involving an immediate threat to the health or safety of the campus community at large and the threat has not been contained or localized,” Loftin wrote.

On Sunday morning, the system sent out alerts on the Web and via messages and phone calls about a robbery on Hamilton Way, a couple of blocks from campus, about 2:30 a.m. Many people did not appreciate the phone calls that woke them about 3 a.m. MU police Capt. Brian Weimer said the system likely won’t be used the same way again.

On April 15, police shot and killed Mark W. Adair, 51, in the Hitt Street parking garage after a manhunt that began about 5:30 p.m., when Adair allegedly tried to rob and kidnap a woman at Moser’s Discount Foods, 900 N. Keene St. An alert didn’t go out until 11:26 p.m., about a half hour after Adair’s death. The next day, the university issued a statement apologizing for not alerting the campus community earlier, and Basi said an alert should have gone out around 9:30 p.m., when campus police had more specific information about the threat.

Do People on the MU Campus Know where to Go During a Tornado

Watch story: http://mms.tveys.com/PlaybackPortal.aspx?SavedEditID=1c30d46c-63cb-42c4-a33d-5e809621cc2b
'American Sniper' Shut Down

April 24, 2015

A student organization at the University of Maryland at College Park has called off a screening of *American Sniper* after students complained that the film fuels "anti-Arab and anti-Islamic sentiments" and "helps to proliferate the marginalization of multiple groups and communities."

The decision came as several colleges continue to face similar protests over screenings of the film. At the University of Michigan, such protests led to an initial decision to cancel a showing there. But at Michigan, the senior administration intervened, citing principles of free speech, and the film was screened.

That's not going to be the case at Maryland.

*American Sniper* was scheduled to be shown in early May at a screening organized by Maryland's Student Entertainment Events, a student group that arranges for films, comedians and musicians to come to campus. After receiving a petition from the members of the university's Muslim Student Association and meeting with concerned students, the group decided to put off the screening. The student group called the decision a postponement but didn't reschedule the event and indicated the film would not be shown this semester.

"SEE is choosing to explore the proactive measures of working with others during the coming months to possibly create an event where students can engage in constructive and moderated dialogues about the controversial topics proposed in the film," Student Entertainment Events said in a statement Thursday. "SEE supports freedom of expression and hopes to create space for the airing of opposing viewpoints and differing perceptions."

*American Sniper* tells the story of Chris Kyle, a former Navy SEAL frequently referred to as the deadliest sniper in U.S. history. The author of a best-selling memoir, Kyle was revered by many as a hero and despised by others as a racist. The film based on his memoir was similarly polarizing. Directed by Clint Eastwood and starring Bradley Cooper, *American Sniper* was a box office hit and earned several Academy Award nominations. But some critics decried it as dangerous propaganda.

"*American Sniper* only perpetuates the spread of Islamophobia and is offensive to many Muslims around the world for good reason," Maryland's Muslim Student Association wrote in its petition. "This movie dehumanizes Muslim individuals, promotes the idea of senseless mass murder and portrays negative and inaccurate stereotypes. Hundreds of thousands of innocent civilians suffered greatly in the Iraq war; innocent people were deposed from their homes, traumatized by
war, and lost their spouse, parents and children. This movie serves to do nothing but make a mockery out of such immense pain.

Earlier this month, the University of Michigan's Center for Campus Involvement temporarily canceled a screening of American Sniper after more than 200 students signed a letter saying that the movie perpetuates “negative and misleading stereotypes” and creates an unsafe environment for Middle Eastern, North African and Muslim students. The film was to be replaced with a screening of Paddington, a family movie based on the popular series of British children’s books about a talking bear with a love of marmalade.

The university later reversed its decision, with administrators saying "it was a mistake" to cancel the showing.

A petition created by Muslim students at George Mason University this week urges the university to cancel a planned screening of American Sniper there, as well. Similar efforts have taken place at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, the University of Missouri at Columbia and the University of Mississippi. At Eastern Michigan University, four students were arrested after climbing on stage during a campus screening to protest the film.

In a statement Thursday, the University of Maryland said it will not intervene in what it described as a "student-led decision."

"SEE is a student-run organization comprised of undergraduate students who work alongside advisers in the creation, promotion and operation of campus events," the university stated. "The university is not involved in the decision-making process to determine which films are brought to campus."

The Missouri Theatre, a Columbia tradition

The Missouri Theatre has greatly expanded the type and style of shows and events put on in its humble stomping grounds since it opened in 1928 and has added even more variety after being purchased by the University of Missouri last summer.

The theater was previously owned by the Missouri Symphony Society, which bought the venue in 1988 to serve as a home venue for the symphony, according to the Missouri Symphony Society website.
The historical theater underwent a multimillion-dollar renovation in 2007 and 2008, thanks to the fundraising efforts of the Symphony Society.

“It was a large campaign,” says Missouri Symphony Society staff member Courtney Buska. “We refurbished and recreated lots of the historical parts of the theater.”

Marge Berchek, a member of the Symphony Society’s history committee, says some of the renovations included replacing decorative plaster pieces, replacing the theater seats, restoring the chandelier, replacing drapes, adding new bathrooms, installing a new sound system, new heating and cooling, replacing out-of-date technology, duplicating and installing the banisters and an interior expansion of the lobby area. An elevator was also installed to provide access to patrons with disabilities.

“The pipe organ is a whole other story,” Berchek says. “The short version is that after years of effort, there is an organ that is appropriate to the theater. The original organ no longer exists. The organ that is now installed is almost identical to the original. It came from the Oxnard Theater in Oxnard, California. It was a generous gift from Julia and Glen Spellman.”

Changing hands

The Missouri Theatre was officially purchased by MU in the summer of 2014, according to Nathan Anderson, general manager of MU Event Production Services, and the MU School of Music has been using the theater for several of its events for the past couple of years.

The Symphony Society decided to sell the theater after falling on hard times during the recession. It had raised $8.6 million for the renovations in 2008, but the restoration ended up costing $11 million. Struggling financially, the society made the decision to sell the theater to MU.

“It was easier to not have to worry about managing the theater,” Buska says. “We could focus more on the educational aspect and our performances.”

MU originally signed a leasing agreement back in 2011, which allowed the university to take over theater operations for three years before the purchase was finalized in 2014.

The theater is now the main venue for the University Concert Series, with upcoming shows including Potted Potter: The Unauthorized Harry Experience, The Chancellor’s Concert and the “Cherry Poppin’ Daddies. The Missouri Symphony Society continues to use the theater for office spaces and performances, and the Missouri Student Association uses the venue for films and speakers.

“It was an opportunity to have another venue besides just having Jesse Auditorium,” Anderson says. “We were missing a lot of opportunity for different events before.”

Preserving the past
Berchek says plans to build a theater and hotel were made in 1927. Originally, the building was supposed to have five stories of apartments above the street level shops and entrance to the theater.

The Missouri Theatre was built back in 1928 and is central Missouri’s only remaining pre-Depression-era movie palace and vaudeville stage, according to MU’s website.

“The Columbia Missourian announced on Jan. 1, 1929, that sound pictures would be shown three days each week,” Berchek says. “There would still be vaudeville acts. By the end of April 1929, the theater was going to present only talking movies and no vaudeville.”

The theater is actually modeled after the Paris Opera House. Although much of the theater has changed over the years, some of the original designs remain, including the plaster reliefs, the chandelier, stained-glass art panels and the Belgian marble wainscoting, according to MU’s website.

“In February 1966, a Columbia Missourian article said that the renovation of the Missouri Theater was completed last fall,” Berchek says. “The work included application of hand-printed pattern on the walls. The article said that the painters were from Germany. Other improvements included new terrazzo in the lobby, patio-style furniture and carpeting all the way to the outside doors in the lobby.”

Looking forward

Nathan Anderson says they’ve tried not changed a lot when it comes to the structure of the theater in an effort to preserve some of its history. MU has made small to moderate repairs to the theater, he says, and replaced some of the equipment that was previously used. Most recently, the university installed a new high-definition DCP-compliant projector system that Anderson says “brings the theater up to speed with some of the like-sized and bigger houses in the country.”

“It is capable of screening films in full HD as well as provide an overall brighter picture on the screen,” Anderson says. “In addition, when applicable, we will be able to download full-length films to the projector in order to allow them to stream seamlessly to the screen.”

The Missouri Theatre was one of the venues for documentaries for this year’s True/False Film Festival. Anderson says the theater showed at least a dozen different films and was close to or at capacity for each one.

“The new projector will have a big impact on the theater’s capabilities going forward,” Anderson says.

The university, with the help of the MU School of Music, also recently purchased and installed an acoustical shell in the ceiling above the stage. It allows for world-class sound, especially during School of Music and Missouri Symphony Society events.
For now, Anderson says MU is “evaluating what they have in the building and consciously working on a long-term plan” since it was purchased last summer.

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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An Author's Take on Campus Sexual Assault: 'Universities Seem So Quick to Protect Their Brand'

By Eric Kelderman

NO MU MENTION

Jon Krakauer's new book, *Missoula: Rape and the Justice System in a College Town*, asks a tough question about sexual assault: How are so many student victims mistreated or even ignored by law-enforcement agencies and, to a lesser degree, by their colleges?

The author's search for an answer involved a protracted open-records dispute with Montana's commissioner of higher education, a case that currently sits with the state's Supreme Court. In the end, Mr. Krakauer explained in an interview on Tuesday, what he learned about how colleges deal with sexual assault was not at all encouraging. Following is an edited version of the conversation.

Q. What’s the most surprising or interesting thing you learned about higher education from your research for this book?

A. I learned a bunch of discouraging things. I learned how universities seem so quick to protect their brand — I mean, so willing to abandon the welfare of their students to protect their brand. And I assume that’s kind of unconscious and just kind of reflexive. And part of this is, I was sort of shocked by the way Ferpa [the Family
Educational Rights and Privacy Act] has been misinterpreted and misused to avoid accountability.

And I’ve got to say that the University of Montana had a lot of problems with its adjudication of sexual assaults, but it was actually pretty good largely because the dean of students, Charles Couture, was really adamant about removing offenders from the campus. He was really diligent, stood up to the administration, but it sort of hinged on that one guy.

But he retired. One of the problems with the University of Montana: Its effectiveness in removing those found guilty of sexual assault hinged on a single, dedicated dean of students, and a system like that, it’s not a good system.

Q. Since 2011 the White House and the Departments of Education and Justice have put a heavy emphasis on the role of colleges in handling sexual assault. Why does your book focus more attention on the failings of the criminal-justice system?

A. Actually, I think it does focus on the university. The focus of my book was to show what it’s like from the victim’s point of view to be raped, to try to get accountability through the criminal-justice system and the university system.

The University of Montana was not a good example of what’s wrong with the university system because [Mr. Couture] was very zealous. I didn’t want to go down a prescriptive rabbit hole about what needs to be done. And I sort of dodged it by saying the university system is really messed up, it really is in need of repair, and it needs to be done on a nationwide level. I kind of left it at that rather than go into the fine print, off in the weeds. That was sort of a narrative decision.

Q. Is it really possible for colleges to handle these situations without having the same investigative powers as law enforcement?
A. I really have a problem with people who say "universities have no business adjudicating rape cases; you have to turn them over to the criminal-justice system." And my problem is that the criminal-justice system is simply not up to the task. It will not remove very many rapists.

The criminal-justice system is so careful to protect the rights of the accused … But [when a college expels a student for sexual assault,] you’re not incarcerating anyone, you’re not putting anyone on a list that will haunt them for the rest of their life as a sexual offender. …

If you falsely accuse someone, that’s a huge stigma. And that’s right, that’s why you have to exercise extreme care before you expel anyone. On the other hand, if you don’t expel a rapist … and that student remains in school, now that victim not only is forced to suffer the trauma of that rape without any accountability, but she is stigmatized as a liar. That is at least as devastating as falsely accusing a perpetrator.

Moreover, it happens vastly more often that women — and men, but mostly women — are raped and the rapist is not held accountable … than men are falsely accused of raping women. That’s unarguable. I would challenge anyone to show me that’s not true.

Eric Kelderman writes about money and accountability in higher education, including such areas as state policy, accreditation, and legal affairs.