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by [Josh Higgins](), news reporter

## Program could improve VT Alerts system

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Students have expressed dissatisfaction with VT Alerts, especially since earlier this year a message was sent stating that a robbery occurred near the Math Emporium, which really took place near Mary Jane Circle.

Following the erroneous message, another was sent correcting the error. Grace Wilde, freshman biology major, was frustrated with the miscommunication.

"VT Alerts left out too much information when there was a robber off campus," Wilde said. "When I went to class, I was afraid there could be a gunman on campus."

But there is a new communication system that could help prevent these mistakes from happening. Text2Them, which Evolve Mobile Communication, Inc. created, allows students to text back to the university, asking about crucial information or reporting activity.

Alvin Butler, the CEO of Evolve Mobile, said Text2Them was initially meant for texting family and friends, not businesses or college campuses.

"However, with the new system, you'd be able to communicate with any department, office or professor on a college campus just as you do now with your friends and family," Butler said.

According to Larry Hincker, a university spokesman, he has not heard of Text2Them but would be interested in researching it further. In the meantime, he seems to think the current alerts system works well.

"The current system is very robust — it has many communication channels," said Larry Hincker, a university spokesman.

VT Alerts uses campus sirens, classroom electronic signs, computer alerts, as well as text and voice messaging to issue alerts to students, faculty and staff, Hincker said. Since its inception in 2007, several modifications and additions of these new communication channels have been made to help get alerts out faster through multiple communication methods.

"You can't rely on one channel," Hincker said. "The key to any emergency system is to ensure that in addition to speed, you've got redundancy.

" The university, Hincker said, has looked into many different alert system options.

"Tech would certainly consider any improvement in our emergency notification system," he said.

However, Robert Crowther, a sophomore civil engineering major, said the system works well.

"I do think VT Alerts is a good system," he said. "We're alerted well in advance — at least I have been in all of my experiences. So I think it's working just fine."

Evolve Mobile's new system would bridge the communication gap between university officials and students by letting students text back to alerts made on campus or alert officials of a possible problem on or near campus. "If you needed to initiate a text conversation, you could send a text message to campus security, and it would be received and create a conversation with the administration," Butler said. If an alert was made on campus, students could use Text2Them to send important information or updates to university officials.

Additionally, if an incident occurred in a residence hall and a student could not make a phone call, that person could send a text to campus security and inform them of the situation — something Tech's alert system does not have. However, Crowther isn't certain this feature is necessary.

"I always text back to the university with a 'yes' when I get the confirmation texts" Crowther said "As far as integrating that into us providing new information to them, I can see the advantages, but at the same time, I feel like it may be a massive overload to the system and the people running it. I don't know that it would be great. But it is possibly something to look into."

In addition to college campuses, Evolve Mobile's systems are being considered on a citywide level.

When the (East Coast) earthquake hit, earlier this year, all the phones around Virginia and Washington D.C. were jammed," Butler said. "We could not communicate, but there was a bigger problem, the entire federal government could not communicate, the state of Virginia could not communicate. Every single government agency was down because the lines were jammed."

The company has proposed a post-disaster communication system to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, which will create lines of communication through text messaging even if the phone lines become jammed from too much traffic.

The University of Virginia, Virginia Commonwealth University and Radford University all use one-way text message systems similar to Tech.