

W H I T E P A P E R

# SAFEGUARDING HIGHER EDUCATION

How to prepare community colleges  
for severe weather

Regroup 

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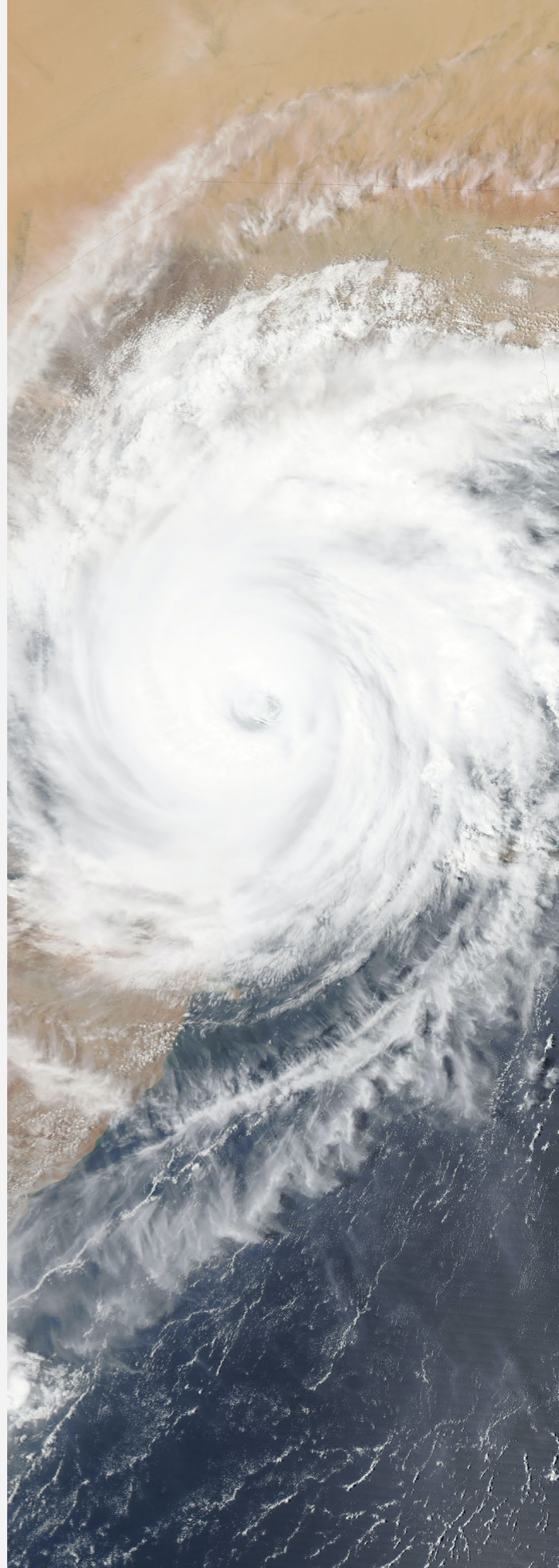


## Introduction

In an era marked by the escalating frequency of severe weather and natural disasters, the impacts of these events have struck a cord on community college campuses. In addition to physical safety concerns, these weather events can leave long-term effects on the institution, such as poor academic performance, faculty and staff income erosion, reduce re-enrollment and high costs of insurance and repairs. These effects have sparked community colleges to confront a dire reality—the need to bolster their preparedness and communication methods for severe weather conditions.

Given the destructive force of most severe weather, the call to action remains clear: it is time to strengthen and enhance severe weather plans within the walls of higher education.

Community colleges must take the time to prepare their campuses for these severe weather events. Identifying a community college's potential risks and exposures and addressing deficiencies are essential practices. Fortunately, several tools are available to help keep students, faculty and staff safe and informed during severe weather, such as Regroup.



# How severe weather impacts community colleges

No community college is immune from the effects of severe weather. Although some regions of the country are more prone to certain natural disasters and severe weather, inclement weather affects every school in some way throughout the academic year.

From delayed openings to complete shutdowns, community colleges must plan early and often for the inevitable effects of severe weather, such as physical safety, damage to assets, lost revenue and staffing costs.

## 1. Facilities damage

Depending on the nature and severity of the weather, a community college can experience damage or complete destruction. Fire, floods and high winds associated with severe weather events can leave buildings unsafe to occupy or damaged beyond reasonable repair. Additionally, the time to rebuild and associated expenses can oftentimes create a financial blow.

## 2. Loss of assets

Even if severe weather bypasses a community college campus, the potential for substantial financial setbacks due to asset damage and replacement of vital resources, such as computer systems and telecommunication equipment, can present formidable challenges. While comprehensive insurance coverage usually offers a safety net for asset-related financial losses, the actual compensation is subject to variables like depreciation. Consequently, this often translates to prolonged waiting periods and reimbursements that fall short of initial expectations.

## Examples of natural disasters and severe weather affecting community colleges:

- Fletcher Technical College was devastated by Hurricane Ida in August 2021, as they struggled to face the challenges and enrollment declines stemming from COVID-19.
- More than 600 students, faculty and staff of Santa Rosa Junior College lost their homes in the 2017 Tubbs wildfires, and the college was awarded \$6 million dollars in a settlement with P&G for damages to the campus in the 2019 Kincade Fire.
- Mississippi's Gulf Coast Community College experienced heavy damage from Hurricane Katrina. The state's College Board estimated the hurricane cost Mississippi's community colleges and universities close to \$700 million.





### 3. Revenue loss and staffing costs

When a community college campus closes for severe weather, the loss of revenue is significant. Beyond the impact of revenue loss, additional costs, such as getting a campus ready for icy conditions or snow removal, are also incurred. Guilbert Brown, acting assistant vice chancellor at the Pennsylvania State System of Higher Education, estimates that a \$100 million campus with 80 percent personnel costs will lose about \$300,000 each day the campus is closed.

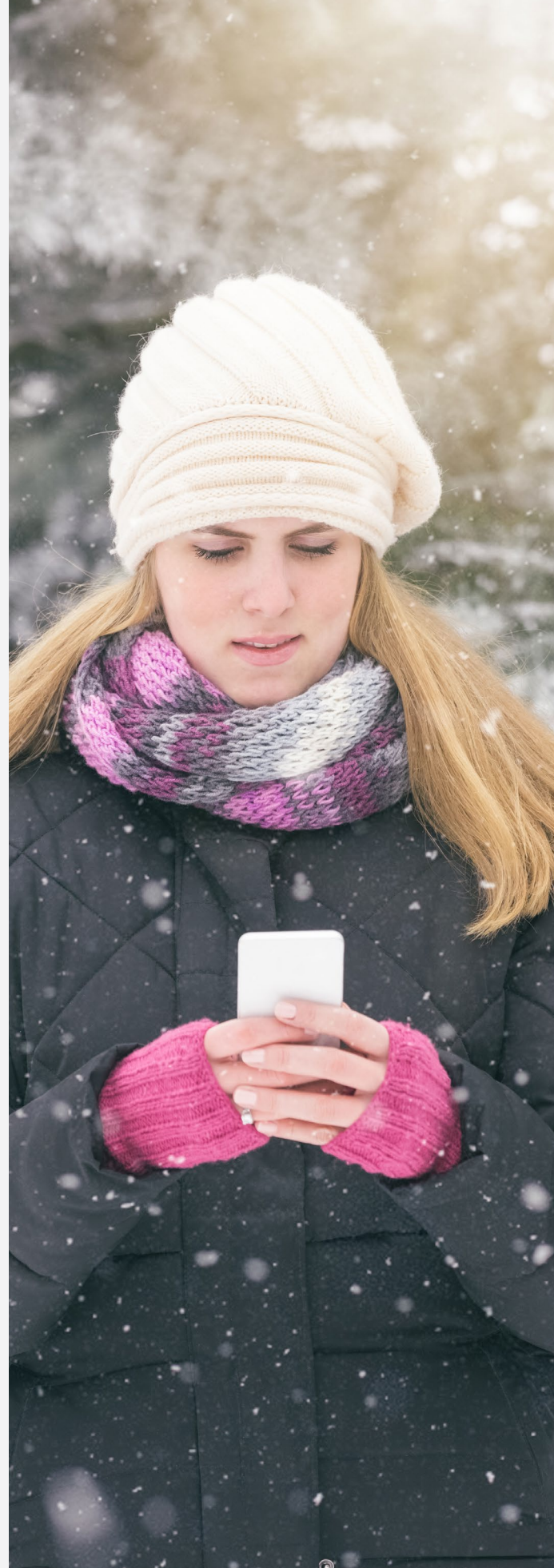
Although community colleges use remote learning, when technology is interrupted, rendering classes impossible, staff and faculty are often still paid for those classes.

These financial implications, often hidden beneath the surface, serve as an urgent call to action for strategic planning within higher education.

### 4. Decreased re-enrollment

When severe weather strikes the area surrounding a community college, the impact on students, faculty and staff can be overwhelming, making it difficult for them to resume their educational pursuits. Re-enrollment rates may decrease as students deal with urgent challenges, such as locating suitable housing, arranging childcare and coping with the psychological toll of the extra stress caused by these distressing events.

Furthermore, the costs of repairs and obtaining insurance reimbursements can disrupt educational plans, diverting attention away from academics. These critical concerns may ultimately result in significant financial losses in tuition for the college.



# Enhancing safety through advanced preparedness

Because severe weather can present significant and long-lasting obstacles for community colleges, having a well-defined emergency plan is essential. Even for smaller colleges, planning for and responding to weather disruptions can be a lifesaver.

There are many facets to consider, and they vary depending on the type and size of the community college. However, for most institutions, having a comprehensive plan offers many benefits. It helps reduce costs, address known and unforeseen risks, safeguard property and assets, and, most importantly, ensure the safety of students, faculty and staff, whether on or off campus.

## What constitutes a weather preparedness plan?

A weather preparedness plan is similar to a disaster preparedness plan and outlines the roles and responsibilities, processes and communication methods during a weather emergency. These plans are strategically created, frequently updated and evaluated regularly. The weather preparedness plan should integrate into a community college's processes and procedures.

## 1. Identify stakeholders

Whether categorized by department or role, it is crucial to identify key stakeholders within your weather preparedness plan. Identify stakeholders responsible for creating the plan and employing various critical tasks when severe weather strikes, including facility security, disseminating evacuation and shelter-in-place instructions, coordinating with authorities, equipment preparation or relocation and a range of other efforts to minimize the impact of severe weather.

Each stakeholder must clearly understand their specific role, possess adequate training and capability and be well prepared to fulfill that role should the need arise. If a stakeholder cannot carry out their responsibilities, a designated backup stakeholder should be appointed to assume those duties.



## 2. Identify vulnerabilities

Developing a comprehensive severe weather preparedness plan shares similarities with creating an emergency or disaster preparedness strategy. It entails thoroughly identifying potential hazards and vulnerabilities specific to a community college.

For effective severe weather preparedness, the plan must first recognize the most likely weather-related damages that could impact the area. For example, if a campus is situated in a region prone to wildfires, the preparedness plan should encompass measures to address this particular risk effectively.

Inspecting a campus before severe weather and addressing physical vulnerabilities is another essential aspect of a robust severe weather planning. This includes actions such as purchasing snow removal equipment and ensuring access to storm shelters.

## 3. Conduct training and drills and regularly review the plan

To ensure a community college is well prepared for severe weather situations, training students, faculty and staff on the policies and procedures outlined in the weather preparedness plan is essential. One way to achieve this is by integrating and publishing the plan into the college's policies and procedures. In addition, scheduling regular and unannounced emergency drills will help prepare the campus before severe weather strikes.

Regular reviews of a school's weather preparedness plan are equally important. The lessons learned from past weather events should generate significant changes in the facilities or management structure and the chance to refresh and update emergency plans. This proactive approach ensures that everyone is updated with the latest information, enhancing the overall readiness and effectiveness of the college's severe weather preparedness efforts.

# Communication as part of a weather preparedness plan

Reliable and effective emergency alerting and communication can improve physical safety and reduce damage to property and assets during severe weather. With dispersed students, faculty and staff, transmitting essential information to the right people can make all the difference between inconvenience and catastrophe, especially when the stakes are high, and confusion can further frustrate response and recovery.

Effective emergency alerting and a communication infrastructure that remains functional despite unfolding events is also crucial in responding to severe weather events. How we respond to severe weather now requires adaptable solutions with mass communication capabilities that are user-friendly and independent of existing infrastructure.

Collaborating a weather preparedness plan with a robust communications system, like the Regroup Mass Notification system, can improve an emergency communications plan's response time and effectiveness.







## Features of Regroup Mass Notification to enhance safety

Regroup provides a fail-safe tool for community colleges that ensures responders can communicate and effectively reach students, faculty and staff during a severe weather event.

Regroup provides many benefits to help community colleges communicate effectively and reliably during severe weather, including:

### 1. Multi-channel communication

With students, faculty and staff working and learning in different buildings on and off campus, emergency alerts should reach people where they are.

Regroup enables you to reach out in limitless ways to contact people where they are during an emergency. The system can quickly communicate important communications via:

- Text/SMS, mobile, email, desktop alerts and landlines, including multiple user accounts
- Social media networks and websites
- Public address and outdoor siren systems
- Digital signage, desktop alerts and beacons
- Security and fire alarm systems
- RSS feeds and cable television
- Private or public message boards and forums
- IPAWS (Integrated Public Alert and Warning System)



## 2. Fast and reliable communications

Response time is critical during severe weather. Regroup ensures swift delivery of emergency alerts, which can help mitigate losses and protect lives and property. With a message throughput capacity of up to 80,000 texts/ SMS messages per minute, Regroup surpasses competitors' capabilities. Timely communication during emergencies alleviates fear, reduces misunderstandings and enhances trust between the school and its community.

In addition, users can accelerate the transmission of critical alerts and reduce the margin for human error by automating the emergency notification process. Regroup also allows creating pre-made templates, such as issuing evacuation orders or instructing people to shelter-in-place, automatically, without any human intervention. Regroup is a cloud-based system, so emergency alerts work even when systems are down, or infrastructure is damaged. All Regroup clients also receive 24/7 customer support.

## 3. Proactive weather alerts

Staying informed of impending severe weather can help community colleges prepare their campuses. Regroup partners with the National Weather Service (NWS), The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) IPAWS and The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to help prepare people for impending severe weather. In addition, Regroup is recognized as a Weather-Ready Nation (WRN) Ambassador by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Regroup's automated severe weather notifications send emergency alerts with updated information regarding important safety measures, evacuation orders and immediate dangers.

Regroup was also one of the first companies to be approved by FEMA's national system for local alerting—the Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS). IPAWS provides authenticated emergency and life-saving information to the public through mobile phones using Wireless Emergency Alerts to radio and television via the Emergency Alert System.





## 4. Functional targeting

One key feature Regroup offers is direct communication to targeted groups. Regroup allows unlimited groups and administrators. Creating groups allows community colleges to target specific audiences through SMS/text, email and voice messaging.

## 5. Geofencing

Regroup's GeoFence messaging empowers administrators to send timely alerts to recipients with specific messages to recipients inside or outside specified areas on a map. Regroup is the only mass alert system to add entry and exit messages for people traveling into and out of those selected areas.

## Additional benefits of Regroup

Regroup offers much more than emergency alerting. Community colleges nationwide rely on Regroup as a solution for daily communications and emergency alerts.

For example, Mississippi Gulf Coast Community College uses Regroup because of its outstanding functionality, ease-of-use and two-way communication capabilities, which allow senders and recipients to text back and forth. Each department uses Regroup, including student services, enrollment management, institutional advancement, emergency management, administration and finance for communications, such as:

- Hurricane and tornado warnings
- Schedule changes and closures
- Alert staff of critical outages (IT, phone lines, etc.)
- Billing reminders





# Conclusion

In today's climate, where the frequency and intensity of severe weather events continue to rise, community colleges find themselves on the frontlines for protecting students, staff and faculty during weather-related challenges. From physical safety concerns to financial losses and academic disruptions, the consequences of these events highlight the urgent need for a robust and well-defined severe weather preparedness plan.

Community colleges must proactively develop strategic severe weather preparedness plans, train others on these procedures, conduct regular drills and maintain effective communication systems to ensure the safety of students, faculty and staff. By leveraging advanced tools such as Regroup Mass Notification, community colleges can significantly enhance emergency response capabilities, mitigate damages and maintain community trust.

The collaborative efforts between technology and proactive planning can reinforce the college's resilience in the face of severe weather events. We must recognize the weather challenges and embrace the solutions that empower community colleges to weather storms, keeping education and safety at the forefront.



## About Regroup Mass Notification

Since 2006, Regroup Mass Notification has provided a cloud-based, multi-channel mass notification platform for emergency and routine applications.

Regroup's award-winning mass notification platform serves education, manufacturing, logistics, enterprise, finance and government. Regroup's continual pursuit of excellence has made it the most trusted name in mass notification and a leading-edge provider of smart communications for clients throughout North America. We provide customized solutions for every organization we serve.

Regroup Mass Notification was named the Platinum Winner for 2021 for its mass notification system from Secure Campus Awards by Campus Security & Life Safety magazine. Regroup enables higher education institutions to communicate better with their communities and respond faster when seconds count.