

executive director of operations at Gulf Coast, said in an interview earlier this year. The college stopped using the service in April 2021.

Gulf Coast was not the only college inundated with irrelevant alerts. Officials from 12 other colleges raised concerns about the performance of Social Sentinel in interviews and emails obtained by *The Dallas Morning News* and the Investigative Reporting Program at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism. Only two of the 13, North Central Texas College and the University of Connecticut, still use the service.

As schools and universities confront a worsening mental health crisis and an epidemic of mass shootings, Social Sentinel offers an attractive and low-cost way to keep students safe. But experts say the service also raises questions about whether the potential benefits are worth the tradeoffs on privacy.

Records show Social Sentinel has been used by at least 38 colleges in the past seven years, including four in North Texas. The total number is likely far higher — The company's co-founder wrote in an email that hundreds of colleges in 36 states used Social Sentinel.

The News also analyzed more than 4,200 posts flagged by the service to four colleges from November 2015 to March 2019. None seem to contain any imminent, serious threat of violence or self-harm, according to a *News* analysis, which included all of the posts

Because everything was irrelevant they decided to end the service in April 2021.

They aren't the only ones who are dealing with this problem. 2 other colleges still use this service.

As threats at school increase, Social Sentinel is offering their service at a low cost but experts are unsure about the tradeoff of privacy for safety.

The amount of colleges using Social Sentinel's service has increased from the past 7 years.

The News analyzed the service from 4 colleges and they all contained no serious threats.

obtained through public records requests.

Some schools contacted by *The News* said the service alerted them to students struggling with mental health issues. Those potential success stories were outweighed by complaints that the service flagged too many irrelevant tweets, interviews and emails between officials show. **None of the schools could point to a student whose life was saved because of the service.**

Launched in 2015 by two former university police chiefs, Social Sentinel told colleges and K-12 schools around the country that its service scanned more than a billion social media posts across multiple platforms each day by comparing them to its “language of harm,” allowing officials to become aware of threats in near real-time.

In October 2020, **the company was acquired by the private Ohio-based school safety firm Navigate360** for an undisclosed sum. Earlier this year the company changed the name of the service to **Navigate360 Detect**.

Though many of its college clients seem to have canceled their use of the service, it remains popular among K-12 schools. A News investigation last year revealed that **at least 52 school districts in Texas have adopted Social Sentinel as an additional security measure since 2015, including Uvalde CISD where a gunman killed 19 children and two teachers in May.** In an interview with *The News* in February, Navigate360 CEO J.P. Guilbault said the

The schools reported that the service allowed them to identify students struggling with mental health issues but they weren’t able to back this up.

Social Sentinel claims that their service scans multiple social media posts, everyday, to find threats.

The service was bought out by another company changing the name to Navigate360 Detect.

Many colleges have canceled their service but many K-12 schools have kept the service, 1 in 4 districts.

company's services were used by one in four districts in the country.

A Navigate360 spokesperson called *The News* investigations' findings "inaccurate, speculative or by opinion in many instances, and significantly outdated." Social Sentinel co-founder Gary Margolis declined to comment.

Privacy and legal experts say the service may give schools the false impression that technology can help avert tragedies, while potentially exposing them to even greater liability.

"People know that it is not going to work," said Andrew Guthrie Ferguson, a law professor at American University's Washington College of Law. "And yet they still will spend the money because they need to have an answer to these really sad, unanswerable tragic responses in our community."

"Useless alerts"

For one former Social Sentinel employee, it only took three days before they had serious doubts about the effectiveness of the service.

The worker estimated that 99.9% of the flagged posts sent to clients were not threatening. The service often crashed because it flagged too many posts. At least 40% of clients dropped the service every year, the employee said. **!**

Navigate360 has claimed that the findings were inaccurate and outdated. They have since declined to comment.

Experts are saying that this might not be the right solution to the problem and instead cause more problems.

Mr. Ferguson says how this service isn't going to work and how these schools are just wasting their money.

The service is proving ineffective due to the many flagged non threatening posts. Every year they lose 40% of their customers.

Over the course of several months, the employee repeatedly raised concerns with supervisors and fellow employees about flaws in the system, but those complaints were often ignored, the worker said.

The employee, who asked not to be named for fear of retribution, said problems with the service were an open secret at the company, and described it as “snake oil” and “smoke and mirrors.” *The News* also contacted more than two dozen other former company employees, who either did not respond or said they had signed nondisclosure agreements preventing them from speaking publicly about their time at the company.

At the University of Texas at Dallas, which started using the service in 2018, campus police officers in charge of the service also grew increasingly skeptical of its performance, emails obtained through a records request show.

“Does the company have any data (not anecdotal) to show its success rate in mitigating harm or disaster through its alert system?” UT Dallas Police Lieutenant Adam Perry asked his chief in an email obtained by *The News*. The chief forwarded the email to a company employee who didn’t answer the question.

Perry said that while the school used the service, the technology never alerted police to legitimate threats of suicide or shootings.

“I think in concept, it’s not a bad program,”

Employees raised concerns about the service but their complaints were ignored.

Many unnamed employee’s spoke up about all the problems with the service.

The officers at Dallas were starting to get skeptical of the program due to many emails.

The police are wondering if there are any benefits to this service and sent an email but got no response.

Even though there never was an actual alert of a threat, Perry believes that the concept of this program is good but needs work.