



Risk Research Bulletin

# A Guide to Creating and Improving a Campus Crisis Communications Plan

When a crisis hits a campus, such as a scandal, crime, or natural disaster, an institution has to act quickly to mitigate reputational or financial risk. United Educators' claim experience shows that when an institution communicates with relevant audiences in a timely manner and with honesty and compassion it can emerge from a crisis with public trust, reputation, and financial stability intact. We call our approach **Cool Head, Warm Heart™** to signify the need for professionalism and sensitivity throughout the process. These communications are too important to leave to chance, particularly in the emotional and dynamic climate of a crisis. Effective crisis communications requires planning.

## Crisis Communications Planning

### LAYING THE PLAN'S FOUNDATION

A sound crisis communications plan includes four essential elements:

- A definition of a *crisis*
- A statement of the plan's objectives
- A list of key audiences
- A multidisciplinary crisis communication team

### ✔ Defining a Crisis

A broad definition of a *crisis* is effective in triggering the plan in a variety of situations. Consider defining *crisis* as any event that threatens to materially damage the institution's reputation or financial strength. This or a similar definition triggers the plan in a variety of situations that can maximize its effectiveness.

For example, an appropriately broad definition of *crisis* responds to both sudden and smoldering crises:

- A sudden crisis is an unanticipated event that strikes the institution and usually poses a health or safety threat, such as a fire, campus violence, or a severe student injury.
- A smoldering crisis is an issue that starts out small, usually in the form of a rumor or something that is known by only a few individuals. The issue percolates and becomes a crisis when it is made public. Examples of smoldering crises include a government investigation, a sexual harassment lawsuit, and unethical employee behavior.

### ✔ Setting Objectives

A statement of the plan's objectives is important since objectives guide decisions made during a crisis and provide standards to measure the plan's success. All crisis communication plans should include as an objective the dissemination of factual, timely, and accurate information. Rumors spread quickly in the initial hours of crisis and an institution must be ready to promptly circulate facts.

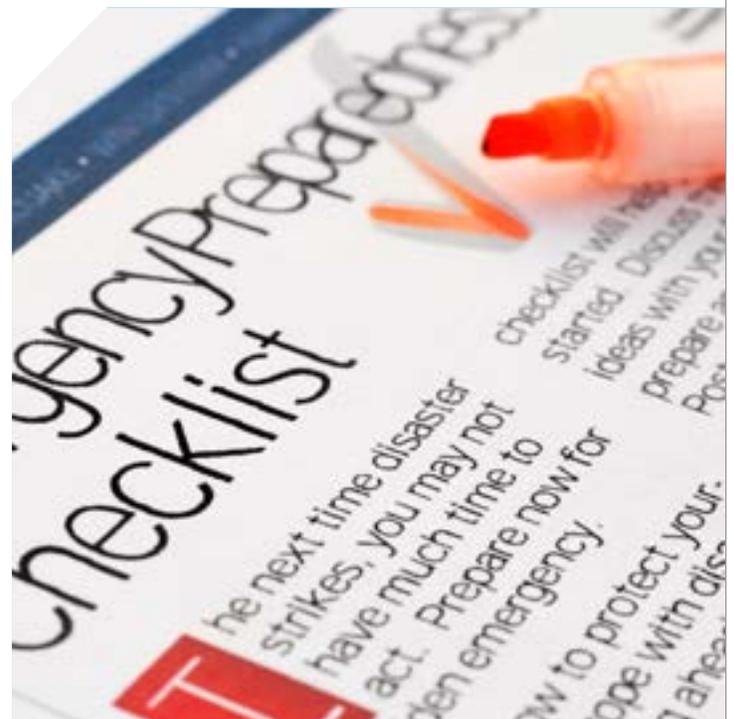
To formulate additional objectives ask, "In a crisis, what action steps should the institution take to communicate effectively?" For example, the University of Alaska Fairbanks's plan illustrates how action steps drive the objectives.

1. Ensure timely release of accurate information.
2. Communicate verified *facts* rather than speculative information.
3. Facilitate the flow of information.
4. Promote and protect the welfare of involved personnel and their families.
5. Retain employee, student, public, and news media confidence in the institution.
6. Use a crisis, when appropriate, to educate the public on broader issues raised by the crisis: how we'll prevent similar incidents from occurring in the future; what programs we have in place and what we're doing now.

### ✔ Identifying Audiences

To emerge from a crisis with the public's goodwill intact, institutions must communicate effectively with the wide variety of people that encompass their key audiences. A crisis plan should identify all potential stakeholders an institution may need to reach in a crisis so that no key group is overlooked when rapid decisions are necessary. Generally, this list includes:

- Students
- Students' Parents
- Prospective Students
- Alumni
- Donors and Prospective Donors
- Faculty and Staff
- Board Members
- Media
- Crisis Victims and their Families
- Surrounding Community
- Government Officials (Particularly for Public Institutions)



## ✓ Creating a Crisis Communication Team

Effective communication with institutional stakeholders during a crisis requires coordination and input from many campus departments. If a natural disaster caused a campus evacuation, for example, collaboration among campus police, public affairs, facilities, information technology (IT) staff, the president's office, and potentially others would be necessary to get accurate and timely information to key audiences. To streamline these consultations, create a multidisciplinary team of campus representatives whose input will likely be necessary for communicating in a crisis.

### Team Composition

In determining team composition, select campus personnel with special expertise, influential positions, or primary responsibility for a key audience. Team composition will reflect an institution's culture, needs, or personnel. An institution should consider including the following individuals:

- **Director of Public Affairs or Communications (Chair):** Most crisis communications teams are chaired by the institution's lead public relations professional. This individual's focus on institution communications makes him or her well suited as a team lead.
- **Head of Campus Law Enforcement:** Campus security personnel are trained to respond to crimes and emergencies. Their relationships with other service providers, such as municipal police, the sheriff's department, or federal law enforcement, are a tremendous asset.
- **Dean of Students:** Student affairs professionals offer valuable insight into handling student victims and communicating effectively with students.
- **President or Chancellor:** In times of crisis, the campus community often looks to the institution's chief leader for guidance and to restore stability. Also, presidential support demonstrates the team's importance and increases buy-in for participation. Some institutions include the president or chancellor on the team, but others involve the leader by having him or her approve the crisis planning efforts.
- **Head of IT:** Some of the best ways to reach key audiences include text messages, email, webpages, and voicemail. Coordination with IT personnel is necessary to use these communication modes during a crisis.
- **General Counsel:** Counsel can provide advice on the legal implications of institutional communications. A team needs to understand not just how a crisis may play out in a court of law but also in the court of public opinion.
- **Ad Hoc Participants:** Individuals with special knowledge of a particular crisis can provide useful information to key audiences depending on the circumstance. For example, if a crisis involves varsity athletes, the athletic director can aid communications with affected coaches, athletes, and others.



Some of the best ways to reach key audiences include text messages, email, webpages, and voicemail. Coordination with IT personnel is necessary to use these communication modes during a crisis.

## Team Effectiveness

Once the team is selected, consider these actions to ensure it functions at its best:

- **Identify at least one backup for every team member.** Backups provide coverage if a primary team member is out of the office, unreachable, or the source of the crisis.
- **Consistently update contact information for team members and their backups.** Regular updates are necessary to quickly reach team members in a crisis. On an annual or more frequent basis, update cell, office, and home phone numbers; work and private email addresses; and other relevant contact information for team members and their backups. Remember to gather this contact information from ad hoc team members.
- **Use technology for quick team communication.** Many institutions use a “bridge call,” which allows all team members to join or “bridge into” a conference call instantly by dialing a number. Consider using this or another technology to quickly assemble team members in a crisis. Also, as an alternative, if technology is not accessible, the team may want to designate a physical meeting location.
- **Meet periodically when there is no crisis.** Teams should meet at least quarterly. Meeting outside of a crisis situation allows team members to clarify their roles and develop a good working relationship.
- **Practice execution of the plan through table-top exercises or live drills.** These run-throughs with the team and in coordination with the institution’s other crisis response teams expose weaknesses, omissions, or other problems.
- **Assess the team’s handling of past crises.** Each crisis presents a learning opportunity. Review the team’s handling of past crises to identify what worked and what did not, and make any necessary adjustments.

## PREPARING FOR POTENTIAL CRISES

After laying a proper foundation, an institution can start preparing for different crises. In this planning phase, the crisis communication team should identify the types of possible crises, prioritize audience segments, and outline the institution’s messages.

### Anticipating Likely Crises

Crisis communication professionals have a saying, “You can anticipate 90 percent of all crises—the timing is the only unknown.” Once formed, the crisis communication team should create a list of the institution’s most probable crises. The list does not have to be exhaustive and should include at least a dozen potential crises. Consider these actions for identifying likely crises:

- **Review local, national, and education-specific media.** Scan the headlines of various media outlets to see which issues generate publicity for educational institutions.
- **Identify geographic-specific risks.** Determine what risks are endemic to the institution’s geographic location. For example, does the institution’s location make it susceptible to chemical spills, a terrorist attack, hurricanes, snowstorms, earthquakes, wildfires, floods, or tornados?
- **Identify any internal problems or issues.** To anticipate potential smoldering crises, the team should discuss whether there are any issues or practices on campus that could be damaging if revealed publicly.

## ✓ Anticipating Target Audiences

Successful communications result from a team's ability to understand and identify the institution's key audiences. For each anticipated crisis, refer to the list of potential audiences (see "*Identifying Audiences*") and highlight those audience members most pertinent to the crisis. For example, if the potential crisis was the suicide of a student on campus, the institution's target audiences might include the student's family, witnesses, other students and their parents, faculty, staff, the local community, and the media. An institution should focus its communication efforts on the target audiences.

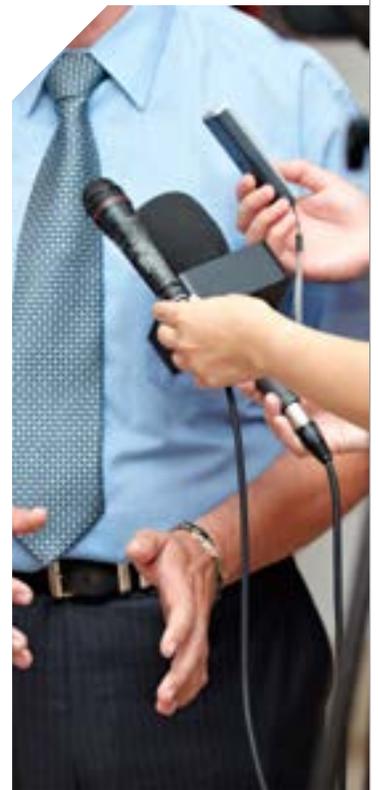
## ✓ Creating Messages

Effective messages result from accurately anticipating the audience's questions. One approach is to have team members imagine that one of their close family members, such as a spouse, parent, or child, has been directly affected by the crisis. If this occurred, what would the team member want to know? The team member will need both a cool head and a warm heart to formulate an answer. Another method is to study past coverage of similar incidents and identify people's concerns. Below are some likely initial audience questions:

- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- What was the cause?
- What actions has the institution taken and what actions does it intend to take in response to the event?
- How will the institution express concern or condolences for what happened?
- When will more information be available?
- Could the crisis have been prevented, and what actions did the institution take to prevent it?

Planning should also include questions that are likely to occur as the situation progresses and more information is known.

There are differing opinions regarding the use of these questions for creating crisis messages. Some institutions use the questions before a crisis to develop messages they can have on file should a crisis occur. Conversely, others prefer using the questions as a prompt for drafting communications during the midst of a crisis. Whatever drafting method is used, the institution's approach should promote achievement of the plan's objectives (see "*Setting Objectives*").



Effective messages result from accurately anticipating the audience's questions. One approach is to have team members imagine that one of their close family members, such as a spouse, parent, or child, has been directly affected by the crisis.

## REACHING KEY AUDIENCES

In the final planning phase, focus on how best to reach target audiences. The method and timeliness of the institution's communications greatly affect the audience's interpretation of and receptivity to messages.

### Using Communication Modes

Teams should account for the different modes available and the audiences they can reach through each of them. Many institutions create tables, like the one that follows, to help them organize the forms of communication and audiences. When a crisis occurs, the team uses its table as a checklist, making sure it has considered all available options for reaching key audiences.

Communication Modes and Audiences	
Communication Mode	Audience
Campuswide email	Students, faculty, staff, and board
Campuswide text message	All subscribers (students, faculty, staff, board, and some alumni)
Campuswide voice mail	All subscribers (students, faculty, staff, board, and some alumni)
Campus telephone hotline	Anyone calls
Email to parents of students	Any parent subscribes
Press release or news conference	Media
Social media	Students, faculty, staff, board, parents of students, media, the public
Student newspaper	All subscribers (students, faculty, staff, board, parents of students, and alumni)
Alumni newsletter	Alumni and donors
Website	Anyone with internet access

There are differing opinions regarding the use of these questions for creating crisis messages.

Some institutions use the questions before a crisis to develop messages they can have on file should a crisis occur. Conversely, others use them as a prompt for drafting communications during a crisis.

In the final planning phase, focus on how best to reach target audiences. The method and timeliness of the institution's communications greatly affect the audience's interpretation of and receptivity to messages.

## ✔ Identifying and Training Media Spokespeople

A primary media spokesperson enables an institution to better control the flow and content of information. Moreover, a single spokesperson dissuades other employees from speaking on the institution's behalf in a crisis. The ideal candidate for the role of spokesperson is generally the college's top communications or public affairs employee.

Depending upon the circumstances, others may act as media spokespeople, such as the institution's president or department heads. Teams should identify all secondary spokespeople and a backup for each. All potential spokespeople should undergo the following training:

- **Media training and relationship building:** Use a reputable public relations firm or an in-house expert with significant media experience to train institution spokespeople. Experienced media professionals can share valuable insights regarding best practices and potential pitfalls for handling the media. Also, before a crisis occurs, introduce institution spokespeople to media contacts. Building a rapport will facilitate media cooperation during a crisis.
- **Legal training:** Tap the institution's general or outside counsel to train spokespeople on how laws affect the type of information that should be shared with the media. Good spokespeople balance both the courts of public and legal opinion.
- **Internal procedures training:** Potential spokespeople should understand any internal policies affecting their authority to serve as spokespeople in a crisis. Spokespeople should also know whom they need to coordinate with before going public with a statement. For example, in the case of a student death, the institution's media spokesperson usually speaks with the deceased student's family before talking to the media.

## ✔ Communicating with Nonmedia Audience Segments

Team members should determine who can communicate most effectively with different audiences for the types of crises identified. Often, an institution's media spokesperson is not the person most appropriate to communicate with each audience segment.

In many cases, the person most appropriate is someone who already has primary responsibility for communicating with that audience. For example, if a crisis involved the sexual assault of a female student on campus, the dean of students may be the best person to communicate with students. If the appropriate spokesperson does not sit on the team, ask that person to consult with the team on an ad hoc basis.

### Communicating with Crisis Victims and Their Families

Communicating well with crisis victims and their families is critically important to mitigating the impact of a crisis. Regardless of what caused the crisis, an institution that shows care and concern to those most affected benefits everyone involved. While some people may fear that any expression of concern or offer of assistance will be interpreted as an admission of liability, UE claims experience shows this is not true. When an institution tends to the needs of crisis victims, it can speed their recovery while reducing the likelihood of potential claims against the institution. Victims are less inclined to pursue litigation if they feel the institution has treated them well.

In communicating with victims and their families, consider these actions:

- **Assign a representative of the institution to act as a liaison.** A liaison responds to victims' needs, provides them with current information about the crisis, and coordinates communications with the institution. Persons with experience handling people in difficult situations or who possess a counseling background make ideal liaisons. Some institutions rely on alumni who live near the victim's family to offer support and act as a liaison for the college.

- **Handle logistics.** By taking care of certain logistics, institutions can ease the stress of a crisis on victims and their families. Consider paying or defraying medical or funeral expenses, tuition, transportation, accommodation, and meals. If a death has occurred, provide information about obtaining a death certificate, closing financial or utility accounts, and clearing out the victim's residence (whether on or off campus). In addition, facilitate contact with people on campus who were important to the victim such as co-workers or advisors.
- **Protect victims and their families from inappropriate communications.**
  - Stop all institution-related communications with victims and their families that may be upsetting, such as notices regarding donating to the institution, an upcoming event that involved the victim, or overdue tuition or library books.
  - Protect victims from hearing improper conversations between police (if there is an active investigation), institution employees, the media, or others by carefully selecting where to locate victims and their families when on campus.
  - Do not disclose private information about victims or their condition before consulting with victims and their families.
- **Provide counseling or other support.** Arrange counseling appointments or consultation with an institution religious advisor, such as a chaplain.

## Conclusion

Timely, factual, and honest communications with an institution's key audiences can greatly minimize the effects of crises on campus. Sound crisis communications are rarely the result of luck. Rather, by developing a crisis communications plan, institutions are more likely to emerge from a crisis with reputation and financial stability intact.

## Acknowledgment

This *Risk Research Bulletin*, "A Guide to Creating and Improving a Campus Crisis Communications Plan," was written by Alyssa Keehan, director of risk research for UE.

EduRisk™ provides education-specific risk management resources to colleges and schools and is a benefit of membership with United Educators (UE). As a member-owned company, UE is committed to helping educational institutions by offering stable pricing, targeted insurance coverage, extensive risk management resources, and exceptional claims handling.

To learn more, please visit [www.UE.org](http://www.UE.org).

The material appearing in this publication is presented for informational purposes and should not be considered legal advice or used as such.

Copyright © 2014 by United Educators Insurance, a Reciprocal Risk Retention Group. All rights reserved. Permission to post this document electronically or to reprint must be obtained from United Educators.

UE-113139r 6/16

