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## CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

# Effective communication in a crisis requires advance planning

By Claudine McCarthy, Editor

**C**LEARWATER BEACH, Fla. — From cybercrime, on-campus violence, student deaths, and natural disasters to academic scandals and faculty/staff misconduct, there's no shortage of potential crises that can hit college campuses. In the midst of a crisis, higher education administrators often find themselves unprepared to manage communications effectively, which only exacerbates the problem, according to James Haggerty, J.D., CEO of PRCG/Haggerty LLC, a strategic crisis communications firm. He spoke at Stetson University's Annual National Conference on Higher Education Law and Policy.

In his line of work, Haggerty frequently sees such problems as crisis plans buried in a server/email or lost on a shelf, delays in assembling crisis teams to coordinate an effective response, and team members editing the wrong version of key documents. When a crisis hits, you'll have only a couple of hours, at most, to respond before word spreads, he stressed. To minimize the long-term, potentially permanent damage to your institution, you must have systems, structures, and leadership in place, he advised.

And you can't just leave it up to your attorney to handle crisis communications, Haggerty warned. "Their initial inclination is to say nothing. If it's not happening in the court room, it's not happening," he noted. "They love to argue, not deliver messages. They thrive on precedent, what has gone before. They want to convince, so they build a logical argument. But in a crisis, that's not the way most people receive information," he explained.

That's why Haggerty advised taking time now to establish an effective crisis communications plan by taking these steps:

✓ **Determine if you have an existing plan.** Do you know where it is? When was the last time you reviewed it and trained on it?

✓ **Tap into technology.** Instead of crisis plans getting lost on a shelf or on a server, look into new technologies (i.e., in the cloud and on your phone) that can help with keeping track of and implementing crisis plans and getting messaging out to stakeholders in minutes.

✓ **Develop a culture of preparedness.** Don't think that because you can't anticipate everything, you can't plan ahead. "Generally you can anticipate a certain number of issues and prepare for them," Haggerty said.

✓ **Know your internal/external stakeholders.** Include students/prospects and their families, faculty and staff, media, alumni, governing boards/trustees, donors, community members, politicians, and government officials. Build relationships over

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time so you establish confidence and trust. Find out how, when, and where they want to receive information.

✓ **Establish a streamlined roadmap.** As bureaucracy grows, crisis teams and plans get lost in the shuffle. Designate a chief crisis officer who understands how the crisis communications systems work and when to use them. Check that your lawyer knows and works with top leadership. Have a process for assembling the crisis communications team quickly and efficiently. Keep a list of tools, resources, and proper methods for communicating with stakeholders. Check your insurance coverage for a crisis management benefit, often offered as a standalone option.

✓ **Know how to use multiple communication channels.** Include social media, traditional media, phone alerts, email, websites, blogs, and videos.

✓ **Build your credibility bank.** When a crisis occurs at your institution, people will start Googling, and you can proactively address results through effective search engine optimization. “If you flood the zone with positives, as it stands now, this learning machine (AI) is going to learn the right things about your institution, instead of the wrong things,” Haggerty said. “The more you put content into the world that accurately reflects who you are and what you believe, the more you’re going to see an accurate response in a crisis. If you have a high balance in the credibility bank, then when something bad happens, the risk will be mitigated as a result,” he added. Filling the information pipeline with positives (before a crisis occurs) raises your balance, but negative impressions lower your balance.

✓ **Inoculate against negatives.** Effective planning can identify problem areas in communication with stakeholders and their perceptions. Proactively address those areas by improving communication and by more effectively marketing institutional efforts and successes. Also, advise faculty and staff to think before they hit send: “Never put anything in an email that you don’t want the world to see,” Haggerty said.

✓ **Shift your thinking.** Instead of thinking, “How little can we do/say to get out of this situation?” or telling stakeholders, “You don’t need to be concerned about this,” start thinking, “What can we do/say to set things right?” Don’t say, “No comment,” or “We believe the charges against us are false and we’ll defend them vigorously” — those types of statements won’t help and won’t make it into articles or posts.

✓ **Respond honestly, with humility and humanity.**

Unwillingness to apologize and the desire to seem smart won’t impress stakeholders. It’s OK to say, “It’s sad,” and even to apologize. “People will forgive accidents and mistakes — as long as you explain what’s happening, why it’s happening, and what you’ll do to prevent it from happening again. What they won’t forgive is if they think they’re being played,” Haggerty noted.

✓ **Say something, even if you can’t share everything.** If a family asks your institution to not release details about a student death, you can issue a statement saying the family requests privacy. When you think laws/regulations (e.g., protecting employment matters or student information) prevent you from saying anything, you can still issue a statement expressing your condolences, for example. And you can tell the media: “We understand your need to gather more information, but the law prevents us from disclosing that. However, here’s what we can talk about.”

✓ **Intentionally seek accuracy.** Expect the first piece of information you receive about a crisis to be wrong or skewed, because people involved may want to cover up their mistakes or they get caught up in the emotion. That’s why, in the initial moments of a crisis, it’s important for your institution to exert whatever control it can over the flow of information about what’s happening, why, and what will happen next. Then,

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assemble the crisis team, create a mechanism for exchange of information, and secure the points of access.

✓ **Create consistent, compelling, and concise messages.** “Long statements generally don’t work,” Haggerty stressed. “You’re not trying to convince, you’re trying to send a message, which isn’t necessarily that you’re in control of the situation but that you’re on it and you’re taking steps.” Ensure statements, talking points, tweets, employee memos, and other communications align with the same core message.

✓ **Keep pace with the speed of today’s world.** Don’t delay in getting your message out, but don’t send reporters a bunch of documents assuming they’ll read it all and understand it. “You have to write the first sentence so they want to read the second sentence,” Haggerty said. Focused on who will publish the news first, the media might not take time for calls or fact-checking, because under defamation law, when you notify them of an inaccuracy they’re only required to issue a correction. But by then, the original, inaccurate version of the article has already been circulated on social media.

Email [jhaggerty@prcg.com](mailto:jhaggerty@prcg.com) or visit <https://prcg.com/>. ■