



PUBLIC RELATIONS
DIGITAL/SOCIAL MEDIA
EVENTS

Politics, Process, and Pitfalls: The three P's that can derail your crisis communications... ...and how to avoid them

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AICUM Association of Independent
Colleges & Universities in Massachusetts

What we'll cover

- Developing greater awareness of politics impacting your campus and higher education
- Understanding the process obstacles to communicating during crises
- Identifying pitfalls that impact your response to and management of crises

The stakes have never been higher

Why?...

- 24/7 news media
- Social media
- Increasing expectation for colleges and universities to publicly address policies and social issues

List of Scary Things

- DACA uncertainty
- Discrimination
- Hate speech
- Sexual assault/Title IX
- Protests
- Data breaches
- Substance use disorder
- International incidents/students abroad
- Greek Life incidents
- Scandal (athletics, faculty, board members, etc.)
- Value of higher education
- Campus violence
- Next election

Recent Headlines

INSIDE
HIGHER ED

Star-Spangled Protest
Off the field, protests continue

HUFFPOST

'Free Speech Week'
At Berkeley Is A Mess

CNN politics

Education Department withdraws
Obama-era campus **sexual assault**
guidance

Los Angeles Times

What UVA did wrong when
white supremacists came to campus

The Atlantic

What **DACA's End** Could
Mean for Colleges

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Penn State Fraternity Is Suspended After Student Is Found Unconscious

What is Expected of Communications?

- Transparency
- Speed
- Consistency
- Confidence
- Authenticity
- Sensitivity
- Compassion

Politics

External

- leadership and policies (federal and state)

Internal

- logistical and hierarchical

- silos/fiefdoms, culture/power clashes, funding/profit centers

External Politics – *what you can do*

- Identify and understand political and/or policy issues that may impact your campus
- Consider which issues you will take a position on and what those positions are (even “no position” can be a position)
- Consider financial impact of action/inaction
- Be aware of existing campus resources and policies related to issues, such as:
 - Sexual misconduct
 - DACA students
 - Social media and email guidelines
- Are there policies and resources that don’t exist but should, based on the political climate?

Internal politics – *what you can do*

- Understand how to navigate your campus politics
- Think about past crisis incidents – what got in the way of success or impeded process?
- Does everyone know the process before crisis hits?
- Who should be on the crisis communication team?
- Do cultural issues need attention?

So...what is your process for responding?

Process:

Follow your Crisis Plan

1. Assess the situation

- Listen. Ask questions.
- Is it a problem, a crisis or an emergency?
- Understand the short- and long-term impact on your institution and campus community
- How visible is the issue? Is it part of the national dialogue? Could it be?

2. Determine strategy for engagement

- Should you be proactive or reactive?
- When do you engage legal, Board?
- When does the president serve as spokesperson?

Process:

Follow your Crisis Plan

3. Identify and communicate with stakeholders

- When does the campus and the community need to hear from the president and how do they hear?
- Recognize certain stakeholders require more attention than others
- Utilize statement / Q&A / talking points / community letter / social media posts as appropriate

4. Monitor for change, adapt approach as needed

- What is the environment like on campus? Is it getting better or worse?
- How have key stakeholders responded?
- Has the dialogue shifted?

Process Problems/Pitfalls

No crisis communications strategy

- Lack of a strategy, short-term and long-term -- how will your approach (action or inaction) affect your institution and your ability to lead in one month? Six months? One year?
- Letting the media dictate your response
- No clarity around crisis team and roles
- Not having a clear goal in speaking out -- will a statement unite your campus or cause further disruption?
- Letting the crisis/bad news define your institution
- Not accepting responsibility

Process Problems/Pitfalls

Lack of Awareness

- Not monitoring the range of social media – all Facebook pages, Twitter feeds beyond the main accounts (alumni years, closed accounts)
- Responding too early or too late
- Overreacting/Underreacting
- Missing an opportunity to listen and learn
- Being tone deaf to what else is taking place in the news
- Being tone deaf to other campus news and events

Process Problems/Pitfalls

No consistency of voice or message

- Not following your institution's internal policies – being influenced by external or internal politics
- Letting the critics veer you off course
- Varying messages to internal and external stakeholders
- Using the wrong channel to communicate
- Overlooking existing communication vehicles

Positive Ps...

Preparation and Proactivity

Discussion Questions

1. How do you monitor new/ongoing policies and issues that impact your campus?
2. How do you balance the need for speedy, proactive, and transparent communications vs. control, information-gathering, and maintaining privacy?
3. How do you address broader societal issues that could polarize your community?