

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Communicating in a Crisis



Twin Cities Campus Operations Manual

Prepared by University Relations • October 2004

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Purpose

This manual outlines policies and procedures for coordinating communication within the University and between the University, the media, and the public in the event of a public safety emergency or issue crisis.

Public safety emergencies include fires, bomb threats, natural disasters, major crimes, or accidents. Issues that could become crises include police investigations, protests, riots, or other situations that demand a public response. The procedures and policies outlined in this manual are not intended to change the way public safety emergencies are initially reported. All such emergencies on campus should be reported immediately by calling 911.

This manual addresses media relations and communication issues in a crisis, and includes procedures to rapidly identify potentially harmful situations and a process for handling communications in these situations quickly and effectively. Campus officials and communicators should be familiar with these procedures and their individual roles in case of a crisis.

The policies and procedures outlined here assume that the Office of University Relations is primarily responsible for coordinating, managing, and leading all communications efforts during crisis situations. In the event of a crisis, the University will always try to notify those most affected and the immediate University community (students, faculty, staff, and parents) before communicating more broadly to the public.

The procedures outlined in this manual are to be used in conjunction with the normal decision-making hierarchy of the University and do not replace that decision-making process. Specifically, this manual will be used in conjunction with:

- Emergency Operations Plan and Emergency Procedures Manual—produced, updated, and distributed by the Department of Emergency Management.
- Emergency Closing Procedures—produced and updated by the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost.

Communications Objectives in a Crisis

- Factually assess the situation and determine whether a communications response is warranted.
- Assemble a Crisis Communication Team that will develop and assist with implementing recommendations on appropriate responses.
- Implement immediate actions to
 - identify constituencies to be informed
 - about the situation
 - communicate facts about the crisis
 - minimize rumors
 - restore order and/or confidence

“The one hour objective”

In addition to the objectives above, our goal is to ensure that the University of Minnesota gives a credible public response within one hour after awareness of any incident involving health, safety, or the environment, or any media inquiry or potential issue crisis that may lead to a story that damages the University’s reputation.

Types of Crises

A crisis is an event or situation that could affect or has affected the health, safety, or welfare of students, faculty, staff, or campus visitors; the environment; or the reputation of the University.

The procedures in this manual will be used for all types of crises.

Public safety emergencies

911 dispatchers should **always** be the first point of contact in any situation significantly threatening the health or safety of individuals; the safety of animals, research, or projects at the University; the University environment; or the University in general.

Issue crisis

An issue crisis is any situation that significantly and negatively affects the stature or public perception of the University of Minnesota. An issue crisis may be triggered, for example, by an investigative news story or a public allegation of misconduct or mismanagement. An issue crisis, by definition, is a situation that escalates rapidly with little or no preparation time and, by its damaging nature, requires a prompt response from the University.

Potential issue crisis

A potential issue crisis is defined as above except that the situation is still developing; it has not yet come to a conclusion. Not addressing potential issues in a timely manner often results in the most damaging type of crisis.

Very few issue crises are total surprises. Usually, key leaders have information suggesting the possibility or probability of a crisis—it is at this stage that developing a communication plan is most critical. This manual provides people the tools to begin planning **before** a crisis has occurred, and in this way, to better serve the University.

Knowing about a potential issue crisis allows the University to

- respond to and manage a situation before it becomes public;
- prepare a thoughtful and timely response.

Following this plan when a potential issue is developing allows the University to take control of the situation by announcing the bad news itself, and, to the extent possible, to frame the issue and announce a solution before the media or a third party can do so for us.

Crisis Communications Procedures

Assess the crisis

The person who identified the crisis should gather accurate information from the appropriate sources. After fact gathering, the person should consult the vice president for University Relations at 624-6868. (If the VP for University Relations cannot be reached,

ask to speak with the person in charge for the day. Receptionists at University Relations will put you in contact with this individual.)

The vice president for University Relations will determine whether to form a Crisis Communication Team and will inform the president, if necessary.

Assemble a crisis communication team

The crisis communication team will include at minimum

- vice president for University Relations, or designee
- University general counsel, or designee
- dean, director, VP in area affected, or designee
- communications staff from the appropriate college or unit
- News Service director

If the crisis is a public safety emergency, the team will include

- Assistant Vice President for Campus Health and Safety
- Chief of Police

Depending upon the incident, other personnel will be added to the Crisis Communication Team to help formulate a response. Those added could include

- president
- senior vice president for academic affairs and provost
- senior vice president for the Academic Health Center
- senior vice president for system administration
- vice president and chief of staff
- vice president and CFO
- vice president for human resources
- vice president for research
- vice president for University services
- associate vice provost for student affairs
- president's executive assistant
- Faculty Consultative Committee chair
- executive director of Board of Regents
- other senior University personnel as needed

The individuals listed above need to designate a backup contact if they are unreachable. Personnel in all offices listed on page 3 must know who the backup is and how to reach that person at all times.

All backups are responsible for the information outlined in this manual.

Refer to the print or online *Confidential Administrative Telephone Directory* (<https://www.ur.umn.edu/confdir>) for Crisis Communication Team access numbers.

The Crisis Communication Team will assess the nature and scope of the situation, consult with others as necessary, and develop a plan of action.

Develop an action plan for communicating in a crisis

Designate a primary spokesperson

In most cases, the spokesperson will be the highest ranking person possessing the most direct knowledge of the crisis (for example, the chief of police in the event of a campus crime). The vice president for University Relations may also be a designated spokesperson.

The spokesperson is responsible for conveying the administration's response to the crisis, demonstrating that the University has control of the situation, calming public concern, and setting an example for the entire campus.

The Crisis Communication Team will also identify any other individuals who may serve as spokespersons, or who could comment to the news media, and will assign a News Service staff person to brief the spokesperson on the facts of the situation and on tips for speaking effectively to the media.

Draft a fact sheet

The fact sheet should contain a summary statement of the situation including all known details appropriate to the circumstances. This information will be made available to and approved by the Crisis Communication Team. This fact sheet should be analyzed with respect to the public's right to know and concerns for privacy and security in consultation with the general counsel.

Determine need for an executive command center and media-briefing center

Determine whether the Office of Emergency Management is establishing an executive command center (for police and University officials) and whether the crisis merits establishing a media-

briefing center (for larger media gatherings for briefings or press conferences), per the Emergency Operations Plan.

Identify audience

Members of the Crisis Communication Team will be responsible for communicating the facts of the situation and the University's intended response to internal and external constituencies. While the spokesperson (as defined earlier) will be primarily responsible for conveying the administration's response to the crisis and communicating with the media, the Crisis Communication Team must determine whom else to contact and how to do so most appropriately. Effective communications with key constituents will help quell rumors, maintain morale, and ensure continued orderly operations of the University. Among the groups to be considered for communication in a crisis situation are

Internal

- Board of Regents
- campus administrators, faculty, staff
- executive committee and deans, directors, and department heads
- students
- University of Minnesota Foundation Board of Directors and donors
- University of Minnesota Alumni Board of Directors and members

External

- local law enforcement
- parents of students
- local community
- media
- government agencies and elected officials
- accreditation or other oversight or grantmaking organizations (NCAA, federal agencies)

Determine the most effective means of communication

After the Crisis Communication Team determines whom to contact, they must decide how. The following issues and mechanisms should be considered during communications efforts with key constituents.

Media logistics and access

Determine whether to alert the media. The University News Service will determine logistics of all media contact including when, where, and how the media will be contacted, which media will be contacted, who will coordinate the news conference (if there will be one), who will appear, etc. Newline can be used to post prerecorded interviews with University leaders.

The Crisis Communication Team will determine what, whom, and when the media shall have access. This includes whether it is appropriate to allow live, on-location shooting by TV and newspaper photographers. (When the emergency operations procedures are in effect, the incident commander will determine media access to an incident site.)

The Crisis Communication Team will work with the News Service to determine if updates are needed, how frequently they will occur, and who will speak.

Photography

Decide if there is a need to assign University videographers and photographers to take pictures of the scene. This may prove helpful in responding to media inquiries and to possible later litigation, as well as in documenting events. Determine whether to supply video footage or photos from archives. Decide whether to provide TV footage for immediate distribution.

Switchboards

The following locations, which receive high volumes of incoming telephone calls to the University, should be notified regarding the key facts of the crisis (fact sheet) and where to refer calls pertaining to the crisis.

- Board of Regents, 625-6300
- Campus switchboard (on campus), 0
- Campus switchboard (off campus), 625-5000
- Campus Police, 624-COPS (2677)
- Human Resources, 625-2000
- University Relations, 624-6868
- President's office, 626-1616
- Student Development, 624-3533

Web sites and e-mail

The Twin Cities home page and other campus Web pages can be used to communicate with internal and external constituents and provide updates as necessary.

Emergency information can be found at www.prepare.umn.edu or, during major emergencies, at www.umn.edu.

Telephone, voicemail, and facsimiles

A crisis hotline, maintained and programmed by University Relations, can be set up and updated as necessary. A campuswide voicemail can be broadcast. Facsimiles can be used to contact certain constituents.

Other communication methods

These may include fliers, meetings, campus and U.S. mail, media, etc.

Follow-up

Following any crisis, appropriate action must take place to ensure that members of the University community, and others as necessary, receive needed information and assistance to help bring closure to the crisis as well as relief from the effects of the event.

Communications

Addressing needs of those affected

Immediately following a crisis, it is imperative that the University is sensitive to the needs of faculty, staff, and students who may have been personally affected by the crisis. There may be a need to assist a victim, or victims, with obtaining information and/or a referral to available resources. The Crisis Communication Team will be responsible for notifying appropriate employees and students. Also, representatives from affected units should follow up with their respective constituents to ensure their needs are being addressed and offer further assistance.

Addressing continued concerns

In many instances, there may be a need to continue providing information after the crisis situation has passed. Take full advantage of electronic mail, updated crisis hotlines, Web sites, etc., and report facts as appropriate to address continued concerns.

Thanking outside partners

Depending upon the nature of the crisis, services and assistance may have been rendered by agencies, companies, or individuals from outside the University. University Relations will ensure that applicable follow-up information, as well as “thank you” letters, are forwarded to appropriate persons.

Debriefing after the crisis

The Crisis Communication Team shall meet within 10 days following a crisis and review all actions taken as a result of the crisis to determine effectiveness and efficiency of operations and make any needed changes to the Communicating in a Crisis Operations Manual.

Appendix

Department of Campus Health and Safety emergency plans and procedures

The following plans and procedures are in place to ensure appropriate handling and response to emergencies arising at the University. Please contact the Department of Emergency Management at 612-625-8047 if you have questions about these plans or to request copies.

Emergency Operations Plan

The University has an emergency operations plan that is reviewed and approved every four years by the State Division of Emergency Management. There is a separate plan for each of the campuses.

The purpose of the plans is to set guidance, tasks, and responsibilities for strategic response to natural and human-caused disasters. Matters such as large-scale evacuations, dangerous storms, hazardous

materials incidents, and response and recovery are covered in the plans. There are individual plans for facilities such as Northrop Auditorium, Williams Arena, Mariucci Arena, and Ted Mann Concert Hall.

For information about the Emergency Operations Plan, go to www.prepare.umn.edu.

Emergency Procedures Manual

This manual informs Twin Cities campus police dispatchers how to handle various emergency situations.

Produced by the University Relations.

This publication can be made available in alternative formats for people with disabilities. Direct requests to University Relations, 3 Morrill Hall, 100 Church Street S.E., Minneapolis, MN 55455, 612-624-6868.

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