

# Don't Let a Crisis Become Your Legacy

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Public perception has become reality -- reputations are made and destroyed overnight thanks to the power of social and online media and an emboldened public who has seen Twitter bring down corporate titans and foment socio-political unrest around the world.

Schools can no longer be certain they'll avoid the media spotlight or trust that their hard-earned reputations will protect them. In 2015, the University of Missouri faced a maelstrom of hunger strikes by the football team, racial incidents and massive protests. "Official inaction" from the administration catalyzed the initial protests, and subsequent attempts at reconciliation, including the resignation of the chancellor and president and appointment of a chief diversity officer, came too late to appease discontented students, alumni and community members. Two years later, as recently [reported](#) by the *New York Times*, the university's enrollment is down more than 35 percent and budget cuts have forced the temporary closure of seven dormitories and elimination of 400 staff positions.

When looked at closely, this case perfectly highlights the challenges universities face in responding to crises. These organizations tend to be complex but siloed and rely on outdated organizational structures and overlapping or even conflicting hierarchies. What is more, their constituents range from donors and board members to alumni and prospective students to current staff and government regulators. Each stakeholder will likely react differently and expect certain remedies based on how a crisis affects them.

Given these unique difficulties, the time to build an effective crisis response system is before a crisis occurs. And though planning for every possible contingency is next to impossible, identifying and training a team of professionals who understand the school and its vulnerabilities and is empowered to mobilize when necessary minimizes potential threats to the university's reputation and lasting legacy.

## **Make the unforeseen, foreseen**

Bad things can happen to universities of all shapes, sizes and denominations. But bad things can be made worse for those unprepared to react quickly and decisively.

"The times have changed," notes Kenya Faulkner, managing director of investigations and disputes at Kroll and the former general counsel and ethics officer at the University of Cincinnati. At Cincinnati, Faulkner presided over numerous campus crises and, recognizing the growing scope of threats to higher education institutions, instituted several crisis management measures. "Now, crises are not a matter of if, but when. The more quickly and thoughtfully a school can react, and react well, to a developing situation on campus, the better the chance they'll have of containing and minimizing the fallout."

Well-prepared universities will have a crisis communications playbook that includes drafts of media holding statements to internal and external audiences and agreement among university officials on how to react to different scenarios.

## **Use your knowledge of the university to your advantage and build the right team**

Schools need a small, empowered, experienced team that knows how to handle an array of events and understands the ramifications of a delayed or flubbed response. The team must be trusted by the board to make decisions and experienced enough to know when to act. For schools like USC, trying to synchronize all 57 members of the board of trustees would slow down the institution's ability to respond and cripple reputational management from the get-go. Instead, board members must trust the crisis team to act decisively on their behalf.

## **Understand risks that are specific to your school**

Not every university is the same, which is why Tim Horner, a senior managing director in Kroll's security risk management group stresses the importance of performing on-campus security assessments as a key to comprehensive risk mitigation. "A small liberal arts college has an entirely different risk profile from a large state school," explains Horner. "It doesn't mean the smaller school is more or less safe than a larger one, but they are presented with threats unique to their size and as a result the planning and response for on campus incidents is much different." Horner recommends that schools take the time to understand where their vulnerabilities lie and use that information to build thoughtful communications and response plans.

Universities, many of whom have been dealing with on-campus unrest for decades, should also use past successes and failures to identify what went wrong and what worked in a particular situation.

## **Avoid unforced errors**

Managing risk at universities includes having a field of vision that goes beyond the immediate present. Ask: How is what's going on behind the scenes at the university going to affect the audiences the university cares about? And don't overlook any key stakeholders. After the Purdue University Board of Trustees issued plans to create an expanded online presence through the acquisition of for-profit Kaplan University, faculty members across state campuses voiced strong disapproval. The deal, one of the first of its kind, was then quickly criticized across the higher education spectrum. While the merger closed, the critiques levied against it cost the university goodwill with critical constituents. Achieving universal endorsement is unlikely in most scenarios, but communicating with as many groups as possible early on can help contain and control messaging and positively affect the eventual outcome.

## **Be aware of the online narratives**

Schools can put out a statement through traditional channels, such as their website or online student portal, but if they do not also address an issue on social media—where their students and concerned parents often check first for news—they will miss a huge opportunity to be seen as being on top of an issue.

Social media can also serve as a way for schools to gain an understanding of the sentiment on campus, and what students, alumni and media are saying, allowing them to effectively respond to unrest and address issues before they take on a life of their own.

## **Don't wait to call in the experts**

Outside help, in the form of legal, PR, budget analysis, forensic investigation, and more, can make the difference between a slow burning crisis and a nonevent. The longer universities wait to see how an incident plays out, the worse it becomes and the harder it is for the outside experts to do their jobs effectively. To add to this, universities increase their risk of litigation by sitting on bad news.

Aaron Lacey, a partner in the higher education group at Thompson Coburn in St. Louis, stresses the importance of schools accepting that they have a problem and mobilizing outside help as soon as possible. "By far, the number one problem we see is a reticence to ask for help, with the result that options are significantly limited by the time we are engaged," says Lacey, who regularly helps for-profit and not-for-profit schools deal with public-facing events like bankruptcies, mergers, closings and fire sales.

## **Preserving a legacy**

A school's reputation is everything and often the real damage from mishandling an incident isn't fully seen or felt for years. The good news is that while no organization is immune to these risks, crises are largely foreseeable, manageable and, if handled properly, can be an opportunity to show students, parents, alumni and others how

seriously a school cares about its constituents.

There are real and proven methodologies for minimizing the fallout of a campus crisis. And though universities wanting to prepare for these eventualities have a tougher task at hand than more streamlined organizations, the challenges are manageable and the benefits are obvious and quantifiable. A school's reputation outlives any individual official or stakeholder but it remains the collective responsibility of the university to take charge and proactively insure its legacy before it's too late.

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