



## **University of California, Merced**

### **CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

*Revised: July 15, 2021*

*Please print paper copies of this plan and appropriate listed information for use during a power-outage or for use off site.*

#### **1. PURPOSE**

A crisis communications plan provides policies and procedures for the coordination of communications within the university, and between the university, the media and the public in the event of an emergency or controversial issue. Emergencies may include fires, natural disasters, bomb threats or major crimes. Controversial issues may include police investigations, protests or other situations that demand a public response. THIS PLAN IS NOT INTENDED TO CHANGE THE WAY EMERGENCIES SHOULD BE INITIALLY REPORTED. ALL EMERGENCIES ON CAMPUS SHOULD BE REPORTED IMMEDIATELY TO POLICE DISPATCH (209-228-2677).

This plan not only addresses media relations and communications issues, but also includes procedures for the rapid identification of potentially harmful situations and the methods for responding to these situations quickly and effectively.

It is the goal of this crisis communications plan to establish guidelines for dealing with a variety of situations, and to ensure that campus officials and communicators are familiar with those procedures and their roles in the event of a crisis. The plan is designed to be used in conjunction with the normal decision-making hierarchy of the university and does not supplant that decision-making process. It complements operational crisis response plans managed through the Department of Campus and Public Safety, Environmental Health and Safety, Facilities Management and other units.

## 2. PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK FOR RESPONDING TO CRISIS

The following statements capture the values and expectations that will guide UC Merced's response to any crisis:

2.1. We will take immediate and appropriate action to bring the crisis under control as quickly as possible.

2.2. We will place the health and safety of anyone affected or potentially affected by the crisis above all other considerations.

2.3. We will ensure high-level university officials are personally involved in managing or communicating about any major crisis and in attending to any victims and/or their families.

2.4. We will make crisis resolution our top priority throughout the crisis and make this known publicly through our actions as well as our words.

2.5. We will immediately signal our *intent* to communicate openly and fully, for as long as it takes, to satisfy legitimate public demand for information about the crisis.

2.6. We will release information proactively upon verification of facts and appropriate notification of authorities and other affected parties (if any).

2.7. We will demonstrate concern, compassion, care and empathy, as circumstances warrant, in our actions and our words.

2.8. We will handle every crisis with a long-term perspective and the belief that our future success depends on the character and integrity we exhibit under intense public scrutiny.

### 3. WHAT TO DO (more details included in the Internal Crisis Plan for Public Relations)

Depending on the nature of the problem, decisions will be made on the following issues:

- Assignment of duties
- Further persons to contact
- Meeting places, times, attendees and agenda
- Prioritization of activities
- Establishment of timeline on further actions

Immediate, yet thoughtful communication is essential in all crises/emergencies. Consider the following:

- Plan an immediate response
- Identify the medium of record (UC Merced Home Page, Emergency Preparedness website, press release, email to campus community). If the campus home page is up, it should be the medium of record.
- Alert university main switchboard 209-228-4400 and any other campus switchboards about where to refer calls pertaining to the crisis. In the event a call center is activated under the Emergency Operations Center, general inquiries would be directed there.
- Activate UC Merced Emergency Status Line 1-866-993-0969. Appoint a Public Relations staff member to record appropriate messages, with a scheduled update timetable.

#### 4. RESPONSE (elaboration of What to Do list included above)

The chief public relations officer (assistant vice chancellor for Public Relations), after assessing the nature and scope of the situation, should call together all members of the Crisis Communications Team to develop a plan of action including some, or all, of the following:

4.1. **Assign duties** as outlined in Internal Crisis Communications Plan (i.e., Content Manager, Media Liaison/PIO, Executive Spokesperson, Support Manager).

4.2. **Designate an operations and/or executive spokesperson:** In most cases the operations spokesperson should be the person possessing the most direct knowledge of the crises (for example, the police chief in the event of a campus crime).

In cases of a significant crisis, an executive spokesperson will also be needed. The Chancellor or the highest-ranking university official available must take the lead in conveying the administration's response to the crisis, showing that the university has control of the situation, calming public concern and setting an example for the entire campus.

Public information spokespersons (those dealing most directly with day-to-day media inquiries) may also include the Assistant Vice Chancellor for External Relations or a Senior Public Information Officer.

4.3. **Draft a fact sheet:** The fact sheet should contain a summary statement of the situation including all known details to be evaluated for possible release to the media. This information should be provided to (and approved by) the Chancellor, Provost and appropriate Dean or Vice Chancellor. This fact sheet should be analyzed with respect to the public's right to know and concerns for privacy and security in consultation with campus counsel.

4.4. **Notify key constituencies:** Determine key constituencies that should be informed of the crisis. It is important to keep administrators, faculty, staff and students informed of appropriate details and actions taken by the university during an emergency. Effective communications will help quell rumors, maintain morale and ensure continued orderly operations of the university.

4.5. **Assign members of the Crisis Communications team to communicate facts of the situation (contained in the approved fact sheet) and the university's intended response.**

Among those that may be notified, depending on the situation, are:

- Law enforcement agencies – should be notified by a campus police representative.
- Campus administrators, faculty, staff – Information to administrators other than those selected to serve on the Executive Policy Group or Emergency Operations Center should be provided via email and/or mass meetings, depending on which technology is available at the time.

- Students – Notices to students can be posted on the Emergency Preparedness website, posted on social media, circulated via broadcast email, and through mass meetings if needed. Fliers may be distributed in residence halls. Remind students of the availability of the Emergency Status Line 1-866-993-0969.
- UC Office of the President and UC Board of Regents – May be reached via email or telephone. Phone lists are maintained by the Office of the Chancellor, who should coordinate any correspondence with these bodies.
- Parents/Family Members of Students – Updates can be read on the Emergency Preparedness website, social media and via the Emergency Status Line 1-866-993-0969.
- Local Community – If the situation has an impact on local residents, fliers can be distributed. Residents may check for updates on the university home page and via the Emergency Status Line 1-866-993-0969. If appropriate, meetings can be arranged with leaders of the neighborhood associations near campus. This should be coordinated with the Assistant Vice Chancellor for External Relations.
- Media Outlets – Public Relations may prepare news releases and/or news advisories for distribution. All media inquiries should be directed to Public Relations.
- Senior Elected Officials – If senior elected officials (i.e., mayors, governor’s office) need to be informed, this should be handled only by the Executive Director of Governmental and Community Relations.
- Alumni Association – This group can be reached by the Vice Chancellor for External Relations or the Director of Alumni Relations.

4.6. **Alert the media:** Determine whether a news conference and/or news release is an appropriate means of conveying information to faculty, staff, students, parents, the news media and the public. The Assistant Vice Chancellor for External Relations (with support of her/his staff) will determine logistics of the news conference including when, where and how the media will be contacted, which media will be contacted, who will supervise the news conference, who will speak, etc.

4.7. **Establish Crisis Communications Command Center:** Determine whether the magnitude of the crisis merits establishing a Media Briefing Center in relatively close proximity to the gathering place of the Executive Policy Group and/or the Emergency Operations Center.

4.8. **Photography/Video:** Decide whether to assign videographers and photographers to take pictures of the scene. This may prove helpful in responding to media inquiries, to possible later litigation, as well as documenting events. Determine need to supply video footage from files. Decide whether to provide TV footage for immediate distribution. Determine whether it is appropriate to allow location shooting by TV and newspaper photographers. Determine when, where and who will accompany the media.

4.9. **Other spokespersons:** Identify any other individuals who may serve as spokespersons or who might be made available to the news media; assign a Public Relations staff member to provide counsel to those individuals.

4.10. **Internal communications:** Determine strategy of internal communications to be used if the crisis affects university students and employees, working closely with Student Affairs and Human Resources.

4.11. **Alternative communications:** Discuss alternative or additional means of conveying information including letters or e-mails to parents of students, alumni or selected constituencies of the university, letters to newspaper editors or consultation with editorial boards.

4.12. **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.

#### **Location/Phone**

Campus Switchboard – 209-228-4400

Student Information (Students Frist Center) – 209-228-7178

Human Resources – 209-228-8247

School of Engineering – 209-228-4411

School of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts – 209-228-7742

School of Natural Sciences – 209-228-4309

## **5. ONGOING PROCEDURES DURING CRISIS**

5.1. Alert Public Relations staff member handling newspaper, video and social media clips to give highest priority to immediately scan hourly and daily reports for stories related to the situation. Send clips or reports as appropriate to the Chancellor, Provost, appropriate Vice Chancellor and/or Dean, Vice Chancellor for External Relations, Assistant Vice Chancellor for External Relations and Executive Director of Government and Community Relations.

5.2. Set up information files on the crisis to reside in Public Relations. Material related to the crisis, including clippings, statements, letters, memos and any other documents, should be forwarded to Public Relations and filed in chronological order.

5.3. Monitor the situation hourly for the first 48 hours and then daily, depending on the nature of the crisis. Frequently update staff and appropriate administrators.

5.4. Take notes during crisis to be reviewed and used to improve future crisis response.

## **6. AFTERMATH COMPONENT (AKA Recovery)**

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. Attention also should be placed on identifying and implementing measures to improve the action plan used during the crisis.

### **6.1. Communications**

6.1a) If needed, a public forum should be scheduled and coordinated by Public Relations to communicate details of the incident and events to all interested members of the university. The timeliness of this meeting is critical and every effort should be made to see that it occurs within three work days from the close of the crisis. Representatives from Department of Public Safety, Student Affairs, the Office of the Provost, Human Resources, as well as Counseling and Psychological Services should attend and be prepared to answer questions and share pertinent information. Specific departments and/or individuals also may be requested to attend and participate depending on the nature of the crisis.

6.1b) It is not unreasonable to expect that rumors would follow a crisis, further creating an atmosphere of anxiety. One means of combating rumors would be to take full advantage of email, homepage notices, the emergency status line, etc., and report facts as appropriate.

6.1c) Depending on the nature of the crisis, services and assistance may have been rendered by agencies, companies and/or individuals from outside the university. Public Relations, in partnership with Philanthropy and Strategic Partnerships and Government and Community Relations, should ensure that applicable follow up information, as well as thank you letters, are forwarded to appropriate persons.

### **6.2 Updates**

This plan will be updated annually.

The core Crisis Communications team should be assembled periodically (at least once a semester) to discuss the plan and any updates. The Assistant Vice Chancellor for External Relations will serve as core team captain and convene these meetings. Results of the meetings and revisions of the plan are to be documented. Copies of this plan should be addressed to all employees listed in the plan and any other personnel who might play a role in the event of a crisis.



**RELATED PLAN:**

Internal Crisis Plan for Public Relations

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## Possible Crisis Communications Scenarios

### ACCIDENTS

- Field
- Lab (Hazardous materials release, radiation)
- Construction
- Canal

### STUDENTS

- Drug or alcohol related arrest
- Drug or alcohol related death
- Food poisoning in dining commons
- Hazing
- Rape
- Protests/riots
- Social Media Bullying/Threat
- Suicide
- Violence

### FACULTY/STAFF

- Faculty/staff violence
- Faculty/staff arrest
- Academic freedom/controversy
- Professor-student relationship with allegations
- Sudden death
- Sudden death of an upper administration member
- Alleged financial, ethical or moral misconduct

- Controversial public comments, behavior or positions on sensitive issues
- Leadership scandal

### NATURAL DISASTER

- Flooding
- High winds
- Earthquake
- Extreme heat
- Wildfire
- Acute air quality issues

### CAMPUS

- Active shooter
- Animal/crop vandalism
- Bio/chemical weapons
- Bombing/bomb threat
- Building failure
- Contagious disease outbreak
- Ecoterrorism/sabotage
- Event disturbance
- Fire
- Hostage situation
- Missing person
- Murder Power loss
- Telecom systems failure
- Water supply contamination