Blue Moon Consulting Group

Higher Education Crisis Management

A PROACTIVE & STRATEGIC APPROACH TO MANAGING REPUTATIONAL RISK

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The perceived effectiveness of the response can have more influence on a university's reputation than the underlying event or issue.

Whether student protests, controversial research or speakers, financial pressure, athletic scandals, political scrutiny or other challenges, all these issues have one thing in common—the quality and effectiveness of the response can have more influence on a university's reputation than the underlying crisis event or issue itself. Reputational damage should not be accepted, however, as the inevitable outcome of a crisis. Rather, poor outcomes should serve as a wake-up call that typical approaches to crisis management on campuses are insufficient and must be improved. In an environment where universities spend millions in *building* their brand, shouldn't there be more focus on *protecting* it?

EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT IS NOT CRISIS MANAGEMENT

One of the most common mistakes is to equate emergency management with crisis management. Emergency management defines the process to manage specific, physical events, such as an active shooter or natural disaster. Crisis management defines the process to manage the broader impacts and consequences of a full range of events and issues – not just physical ones. Emergency management is important. However, on its own it is not sufficient. Based on a typical university's risk profile and the fact that 90% of crises are driven by reputational risk, emergency response is typically over-emphasized.

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IS NOT CRISIS MANAGEMENT

A second mistake is to equate crisis communications with crisis management. While communications certainly is the "tip of the spear" – a critical, visible and impactful part of crisis management — it should not be mistaken for the whole. Yet for many organizations, a crisis is the point at which stakeholders – whether students, alumni, regents, media, etc. – start to make inquires leading to the inevitable question, "what are we going to say?" From a crisis management standpoint, equally critical to answer should be the questions, "why didn't we know about this earlier?", "who needs to be involved?" and, of course, "what are we going to do?"

THE FOUR CRITICAL COMPONENTS TO EFFECTIVE CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Without addressing these questions, you have – to continue the analogy – the equivalent of the "tip" without the "spear" which will have no momentum, direction or impact. Your institution's response will not only be lacking, but the risk is high that the institution will face significant reputational risk and the leadership team will lose credibility.

The following outlines the four critical components to effective crisis management...

1 "WHY DIDN'T WE KNOW ABOUT THIS EARLIER?"

One of the typical criticisms of crisis response is that the institution reacted too slowly and that the incident wasn't taken seriously until it became public. This invariably exacerbates reputational risk and can lead to the institution becoming defensive and reactive. But it's hard, if not impossible, to be proactive on an issue or event if you find out about it too late!

The ability to nip a crisis in the bud is only possible with:

- **A Clear Reporting Process & Criteria**
  Defining the what, how, when and to whom issues and events that have the potential to create significant reputational risk are identified and reported.
- **A Strategic Incident Screening Process**
  Analyzing and assessing information in a broader context. Crises never happen in a vacuum and it is critical that an organization can "connect-the-dots" to proactively anticipate the risks and the response required.
- **Defined Parameters for Crisis Team Activation**
  Detailing when and how your university's Crisis Management Team will be engaged such that it is understandable, predictable and repeatable. This should encompass a full range of risks, not just when the Emergency Management Team is activated.

Neglecting to put a formal reporting and escalation process in place, assuming "we'll know it when we see it," virtually ensures that your institution will be behind the eight ball by the time you become aware of a crisis.

KEY BENEFIT

Incorporating Issue/Event Reporting & Escalation into a crisis plan allows a university to take pre-emptive measures to mitigate the impact of the issue or event, potentially preventing it from becoming a crisis in the first place. It also prevents the following problems:

- Relevant information not being escalated promptly, leading to a real or perceived slow response
- Increased confusion resulting from different parts of the organization having different information and perspective on the risk

A proactive reporting and escalation process can also demonstrate to stakeholders the seriousness with which the institution takes an issue.

ISSUE/EVENT REPORTING & ESCALATION

Incident/Event That Meets Reporting Criteria:

GOVERNMENT/REGULATORY
Hostile Political Environment, Accreditation/Rankings Issues, Changing Requirements

INFO TECHNOLOGY
Social Media Abuse, Unauthorized Data Modification, Data Compromise/Breach, Obsolescence/Extended Downtime

STUDENT/CAMPUS LIFE
Sexual Assault, Free Speech Issues, Mental Health, Protests/Building Occupation, Minors on Campus, Acts of Hate/Bias

FACULTY/STAFF
Academic Freedom, Unionization, Plagiarism, Recruitment/Retention, Moral, Admissions/Sports Scandals

FINANCIAL/LEGAL
Conflicts of Interest, Fraud/ Malfeasance, Regulatory Requirements, Budget Cuts/ Insufficient Funds, Int'l Ops

RESEARCH
Misconduct, Environmental Health/Safety, IP Infringement, Unethical/Unapproved Human/ Animal Research

Screening Team

- Option #1 → No Response
- Option #2 → Monitor/ Assign Response
- Option #3 → CMT Activation



EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ≠ CRISIS MANAGEMENT

Most campuses are like small towns with their own police, and sometimes, fire departments. Police chiefs are trained on the Incident Command System (ICS) and compliance with NIMS (National Incident Management System) is a federal requirement for DHS funding. Established in 2004 by Presidential directive and building on the ICS protocols developed in 1970 by California in the aftermath of a devastating fire; the NIMS' disciplined approach to emergency management is designed to, primarily, solve problems of coordination and command among first responders.

In the past 15-20 years, a significant effort has been spent to embed ICS and NIMS-compliant emergency management procedures at campuses across the country. As a result, most universities are well prepared for on-site events such as an active shooter or natural disaster. While critical, unfortunately, this focus on emergency management has given universities a false sense that they have a "crisis management" capability in place – when in fact they do not.

The vast majority of events that will threaten your institution's reputation will not be caused by "emergency management" type events. Rather they will be caused by protests, academic scandal, sexual assault, data breaches, activism, and a range of financial, social and ethical issues. The danger for your organization lies in the management of these crises. Managed poorly and the response is going to be remembered and the reputational damage significant. Managed well and the reputation of your organization and its leadership can be burnished. For this reason, it is essential that a similar discipline, process and cross-functional approach used in emergency management be applied to all major reputational risks.

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2 “WHO ELSE IS INVOLVED AND WHO IS DOING WHAT?”

Universities may have different views of what constitutes a crisis plan, but by and large, most fall short in clearly defining roles, responsibilities, alignment and leadership.

Some crisis plans simply describe the communications’ team roles – who is responsible for media relations, social media, student communications, etc. But to be effective, it is vital that your crisis management plan provide clarity and alignment in the roles and responsibilities of all the different parts of the organization that may be required to respond to an issue or event.

Emergency Management Plans (EMP) typically recognize that a group of senior, cross-functional leaders does sometimes need to be involved in response; however, the role of this Executive Policy Group (EPG) tends to be only lightly described and often defaults to an existing leadership team. In most cases this “default team” is simply too large to be effective or may not have the appropriate expertise required to manage the crisis. In practice at most universities, this EPG is rarely used by senior campus leaders to manage the host of non- emergency related issues and crises.

CRISIS MANAGEMENT TEAM (CMT) MEMBERSHIP

Your institution’s CMT (or EPG) should not default to the President’s direct reports or the Cabinet. Rather, it should be a smaller, pre-selected core team of leaders who have the expertise and authority that is critical for effective response. For example, Campus Counsel and Communications need to be core members whether or not the role is a Vice President level position or direct report. Aside from a small core group,additional extended team members should be included, based on the specifics of the event or expertise required, for example the Athletic Director (if the issue involves a sports issue); the Chief of Police (criminal investigation); or the VP of Research or the VP of a Medical Center (if the issue is specific to those areas of university operations).

The CMT needs defined leadership, authority, core member- ship, specific functional roles/responsibilities, backup, and extended team membership. Members must understand when the team is activated; how information about the full range of negative issues and events is reported and escalated; how the team is expected to function; and, most importantly, that its role is to focus on the strategic impacts and consequences of the issue/event.

KEY BENEFIT

Defining the Response Structure & Team Roles in your crisis plan can help alleviate the tremendous stress on your leadership team as well as prevent the following problems:

- Lack of coordination across the organization – the proverbial left hand not knowing what the right hand is doing
- Unnecessary delays caused by selection of an ad hoc team
- Internal confusion over who is responsible for what
- Organizational silos impeding effective response
- Decisions being made prematurely or not at all
- Duplication of effort caused by lack of clear division of labor

COORDINATION AND ALIGNMENT

Universities, certainly compared to multinational corporations, are relatively streamlined organizationally. It is important, however, to understand what other capabilities or response expectations may exist. For example, in addition to the Emergency Management team, some universities may have a Data Breach Response Team, a Behavioral Threat Assessment Team, or even Incident Management teams at related organizations, most frequently affiliated healthcare institutions or international satellite schools or overseas programs. Understanding how these different parts of the university may need to coordinate, share information and ensure a clear division of labor and responsibility, are important components of crisis management planning.

Additionally, for those campuses that are part of a state system or other type of network, it is critical to define and understand the expectations that the Office of the System President (or similar body) may have. Does the issue at your campus have system-wide implications? Are resources and/or experience available at the system level? How is the strategy going to be coordinated? How can you work to make sure that communications are aligned?

Understanding in advance who is responsible for what ensures a fast, cohesive, and effective response.

This is only possible with:

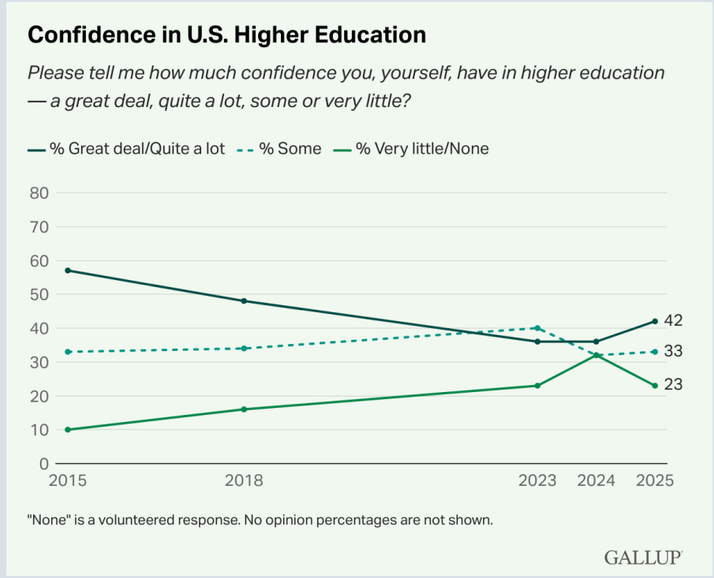
- **A Clear Response Structure** identifying the teams that may be activated, their roles and responsibilities, whether on campus or as part of a system
- **A Defined CMT** detailing leadership, core members, extended members (who are only required for certain specific issues and events) and back-ups when primary members are unavailable

When every move is critical and your leadership is under intense scrutiny, the last thing your organization needs is to be perceived as disorganized. Your stakeholders – whether alumni, prospective parents, students or the media – are not going to care about internal org charts and will not tolerate confusion and contradictions. An established response structure and practiced teams ensures that the right people are in the right room and ready to act when the situation requires.

DECLINING TRUST, INCREASING PRESSURE

While battling polls have provided conflicting information recently—no doubt a reflection of the current political environment—indisputably overall trust in higher education has been steadily declining over the past ten years. Recent protests and encampments, mishandled of sexual assault investigations, scandals across admissions and athletics, increased unionization and financial challenges have only served to further feed the broader and prevailing narrative—that colleges and universities are antiquated, isolated, and hopelessly out-of-touch.

In this pressured climate, there is precious little grace for the school that becomes embroiled in one of these crises. Without a focus on effective planning and preparation, your institution risks becoming another example for what is wrong with higher education.



3 “WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO?”

Crises are difficult enough to manage without making up the response process as you go along. Getting the team into the “room” (virtual or otherwise) is critical but insufficient. Unfortunately, most Emergency Management plans say little about how the EPG should function beyond a room location and who should show up. In fact, the only thing many plans describe is the President’s responsibility to “declare an emergency,” which while obviously important and appropriate, simply is not a relevant action in the vast majority of issues and events for which a CMT should be activated.

Too much happens too fast for the management process not to be clarified or for CMT meetings to go on for hours. Chaos is not an acceptable operating model, and a defined management process helps effective response.

Succinct and focused meetings are only possible with:

- **Efficient Time Management** Scheduled meetings, defined agendas and set end times
- **An Effective Information Update/Coordination Process** Increasing situational awareness in a consistent fashion, particularly critical if other teams are involved
- **Action Tracking and Accountability** Utilizing simple management tools help ensure everyone is clear on priorities, action items, responsibilities and deadlines
- **Proactivity** Ensuring a deliberate process to anticipate future risks and identifying strategic issues which will need to be addressed

The goal of crisis management is to manage the crisis, not merely respond. The same level of diligence and clarity that is often defined in how your tactical, site-based emergency response team operates should be applied to how leadership operates too!



ISSUES MANAGEMENT

If crisis management is about managing potentially high impact and/or unexpected events, issues management is about pushing back the timeline—creating options, buying time, and ultimately (and ideally) preventing the avoidable, self-inflicted crises from occurring in the first place. Issues management is essentially about “risk sensing,” the capability to detect and identify issues or events sufficiently early so that the organization can prevent them from degenerating into a crisis. While typically in the domain of a communications department, issues management can only be truly effective if it is aligned with the university’s priorities and proactively incorporated into strategic decision-making.

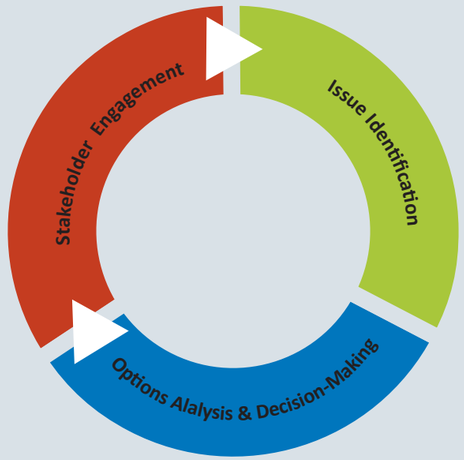
Issues management takes the same stakeholder-centric approach that is critical to effective crisis management and applies it to day-to-day decisions using the following steps:

Step 1: Issue Identification Who are your stakeholders? How well do they know your organization? What issues are important to them? Ideally you will identify both issues that could become problematic down the line as well as those that provide strategic opportunity for strengthening stakeholder relationships in the future.

Step 2: Options Analysis & Decision-Making Prioritize issues based on their threat level (or opportunity), how strongly priority stakeholders feel about the issue and how pervasive the issue is across stakeholder groups. Identify tangible steps to either “protect” against downside risk or “build” on underutilized strengths or opportunities.

Step 3: Stakeholder Engagement Deepen stakeholder relationship by actively engaging and incorporating their perspectives back into key decision-making.

Through issues identification, options analysis & meaningful stakeholder engagement, issues management can serve as an early-warning indicator and, through strategic changes or more effective communications, can prevent an issue from becoming a crisis.



KEY BENEFIT

Having a Defined Management Process as part of a crisis plan facilitates focused and efficient team meetings and prevents the following problems:

- Members having an out-of-date understanding of the situation
- Meetings that are too focused on the specifics of the incident, too tactical or operational and don’t anticipate broader, strategic challenges
- Meetings that do not lead to decisions or where there is confusion about whether or not decisions have been made
- Wasted time with meetings that last for hours

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4 "WHAT ARE WE GOING TO SAY?"

Explaining in a consistent, credible and compassionate way the university's response is not only critical but will be the major determinant in shaping how the institution and its leadership will be perceived. The sheer number of stakeholder groups – students, faculty, staff, parents, alumni, corporate partners, legislators, local community groups, the Board, not to mention the media – coupled with the pressure and time constraints of social media, highlights the importance of having key aspects of effective crisis communications defined well in advance. This is particularly important since "day-to-day" responsibility for communicating with these various stakeholders frequently resides in different parts of the university which may, or may not, coordinate effectively.

Effective crisis communications is only possible with:

- **A Clear and Expeditious Approval Process for Key Messaging** Identifying who can/must approve in a fast-moving, fluid situation. Normal approval processes generally will not be sufficient when a timeframe closer to an hour is more appropriate.
- **Defined Spokesperson** Ensuring that there is clarity regarding the role of the President and who will be attributed in statements and/or speak to the press
- **A Social Media Crisis Policy** Proactively detailing the role social media will play in a crisis
- **A Communications "Hold" Policy** Clarifying that CMT activation immediately suspends all communications – even those completely unrelated to the event at hand – unless explicitly approved by the Vice President of communications
- **A Defined Coordination Process** Ensuring effective communications coordination, regardless of typical reporting lines, so that stakeholders are receiving consistent messaging and facts about the administration's response
- **Pre-Agreed and Approved Messaging For Specific Issues/ Risks** Expediting response at time of event, including holding statements, hard Q&As etc.

More detailed crisis communications addenda (or a separate communications plan) can define individual team members' roles and responsibilities, press conference logistics, key reporters contact info, media training requirements for identified spokespeople, etc.

KEY BENEFIT

Ensuring Crisis Communications is clearly defined as part of a comprehensive crisis plan prevents the following problems:

- Slow or insufficient communications
- Premature communications based on misunderstanding of situation, risks, leading to damaging retractions
- CMT meetings degenerating to word-smithing press releases with "happy-to-glad" edits rather than addressing unresolved strategic issues
- Inconsistent messaging or poor timing/sequencing of communications across multiple stakeholder groups (i.e. Faculty/Board hearing about event from media reports; on-going promotional activities that suggest misplaced priorities etc. exacerbating reputational risk)
- Wasted time with meetings that last for hours



A press release can't save an institution— only action can.

If your crisis plan only defines the functional requirements of communications, it will undermine the critical, strategic role that communications should play in a crisis. Poor crisis response is almost guaranteed when communications is not at the table when decisions are being made, leaving them in the unenviable position of having to "explain" potentially poor decisions that will not withstand stakeholder scrutiny. Which brings up the final point…

Crisis Management is About More Than a Plan

Crisis management is about having the right organizational mindset that actively incorporates reputational risk into the decision-making process. Reputation must be viewed as a critical input into decision-making, not just an output, a by-product of decisions already made. Reputational risk is created when there is a significant disconnect between what the organization does and what its stakeholders expect. A premium must be placed, therefore, on understanding the perspective, the expectations, and needs of the range of stakeholders who are impacted by your institution's decision.

Developing a crisis plan with the four components discussed:

- Helps ensure that you learn about events sufficiently early to be proactive
- Removes internal silos and barriers to coordinated and effective response
- Defines not only who needs to be involved in decision- making but how that will be implemented throughout the organization
- Gives communications a fighting chance – the opportunity to help inform strategic decision-making and develop a credible message and communications strategy to reduce the reputational damage the underlying event or issue could cause.

The approach outlined should be completely aligned with your existing emergency management process. It is simply more robust and holistic and recognizes the importance of having a defined and consistent process to manage the full range of issues and events – beyond physical disruption – that potentially threaten the reputation of a university.

This broader approach to crisis management, particularly when supported by a solid risk management program and aligned with a proactive approach to issues management, will protect your university both in advance of and during a crisis.

REPUTATIONAL RISK MANAGEMENT FRAMEWORK

Built on a solid risk management program, effective reputational risk management is a proactive framework and process that identifies strategic opportunities as well as risks; effectively manages crises or significant issues when they do arise; and creates a reservoir of goodwill amongst the multiple stakeholders the organization requires to thrive.



Strategic Clarity, Tailored Support

ABOUT BLUE MOON CONSULTING GROUP

Blue Moon Consulting Group is a boutique firm focused on higher education. We provide insight, counsel, and experience to help college and university leaders **prepare proactively** by anticipating issues and becoming crisis-ready; **respond effectively** to preserve stakeholder trust; and **build with purpose** by advancing their strategic vision.

WE'VE BEEN THERE

Blue Moon Consulting Group understands the broad range of risks that you face. Our team has been in the trenches with organizations in crisis for decades. We know what works, what doesn't, and how to prevent needlessly making the situation even worse. We've supported institutions of higher education to manage their response to protests, academic scandal, child molestation, data breaches, activism, and a range of financial, social and ethical issues. We'll help you avoid the mistakes that many organizations make as well as seize potential opportunities that a crisis can present. We help ensure that you not only survive but emerge stronger.

WE'LL HELP YOU PREPARE

Don't wait until an issue or crisis event is upon you. At Blue Moon Consulting Group, we've created world-class crisis management programs for every type of campus—from small private colleges to state-wide university systems with multiple campuses and affiliated healthcare organizations and research facilities. We've conducted training sessions for Presidents and their teams on crisis leadership and we've held multi-location and multi-team functional and tabletop exercises focused on decision-making, policy, and reputational risk.

There's no easy, off-the-shelf answer to solving one of the biggest challenges institutions of higher education face today. But Blue Moon Consulting Group has developed a rigorous, comprehensive and proven methodology to reduce the impact of reputational risk. We'll help you get ready.

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OPTIMISM IS NOT A STRATEGY.