When to Speak and What to Say: Effective Crisis Communications

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Workshop Agenda

- The Current Landscape
- Shifting Public Opinion
- Leading with Institutional Values
- A Framework for When to Speak
- Identifying Audience and Method
- Crisis Communications Principles
- Exercise
External Events of Significance

Internal Issues and Crises
The Current Landscape
Warning of ‘Grave’ Errors, Powerful Donors Push Universities on Hamas

Wall Street financiers are pressing elite schools to condemn criticism of Israel. On Sunday, the University of Pennsylvania issued a statement calling Hamas’s attack terrorism.

With War Raging, Colleges Confront a Crisis of Their Own Making

Oct. 26, 2023

The Israel-Hamas war has roiled US campuses. Students on each side say colleges aren’t doing enough

Speak Out on Israel-Hamas War or Stay Quiet? Both Are Risky, Colleges Find

Leaders at Stanford, Williams and elsewhere limit their statements, but neutrality proves a challenge
Did you say something?
How did your campus respond?
Has your president or campus shifted their position on public statements over the last year?
Public Opinion is Shifting
41% of Americans say businesses should take a public stance on current events.

Source: Bentley-Gallup Business in Society Report, 2023
-7% Year-over-year

Source: Bentley-Gallup Business in Society Report, 2023
53%

Americans aged 18-29 are much more likely to want a business to take a public stance.

Source: Bentley-Gallup Business in Society Report, 2023
Leading with Institutional Values
Authentic and meaningful responses to issues and crises align clearly with a shared set of institutional values.

Our first question in preparing for or responding should be:

**What are our institutional values and beliefs on this topic?**

The answer should then serve as a bright guiding light for all responses. When we develop shared values and respond in line with those values, we build trust with our community and are true to ourselves.
A Framework for When to Speak
Key Question:
What is the best response for our campus community?
Statement or No Statement?

A test for whether to issue an institutional statement on national issues and crises.

by Melissa Richards

Public relations officers and college presidents have spent so much time over the last two years focused on empathetic and compassionate communications that our initial reaction to every national crisis seems to be, “We need a statement.”

But while holding is an important leadership principle, it must not always take the form of a community email. Sometimes our people need space, sometimes they need another and sometimes they need to hear from their president or dean. When deciding whether to issue a statement, consider the following test, which was compiled over a period of years throughout my career. While the language is my own, this topic has been referenced by other professionals in a number of formats. I do not claim copyright but instead share my experiences and how I’ve adapted and expanded industry conversations over the years.

- Is the critical event relevant to higher education?
- What is the circle of influence: Is it a local, regional, national or international issue?
- Why would we want to communicate about the event?
  - Moral?
  - Value-driven?
  - Sympathy?
  - Political?
- What are our peers doing?
- Do the words reflect the tone and personality of the leader and the college?
- Would a statement by the college add to the conversation?
- Is the college positioned to affect change?
- Does the event directly affect our community, students, employees?
- Is the college taking any action to support the affected community?
- Will the statement be perceived as discriminating against another group?
Additional Questions

- Does intensity, centrality or geography dictate our campus react differently than peers?
- Will any statement impinge on normal public discourse?
- Will a statement contribute to the health, wellbeing and/or safety of our campus community?
Determining Audience
Higher Education Audiences

Internal

- Students
- Faculty
- Staff
- Parents/Families
- Alumni
- Donors

External

- General Public
- Journalists/Media
- Prospective Students
- Policy Makers
- Higher Ed Peers
Making your students the primary audience is usually the best option.
Determining Communications Method
Communications Methods

● Email
● Website
● Social Media
● Text
● Newsletter
● Video
● Webinar
● In-person meeting/public appearance
● News Media
Crisis Communications Principles
Communications Methods

- **Be prepared.** Develop a crisis communications plan that outlines how you will respond. This plan should include a list of spokespersons, communication channels, and messaging. Review it regularly.
- **Be transparent.** Communicate openly and honestly. This means sharing information as soon as possible, even if it is bad news.
- **Be responsive.** Respond to all inquiries promptly and professionally. Be prepared to answer questions about the crisis and your organization's response. Listen to your community.
- **Be empathetic.** Show compassion and understanding for your stakeholders during a crisis. Acknowledge the impact that the crisis is having on them.
- **Be consistent.** Maintain a consistent message.
Anticipate the implications of your leadership decisions and responses to your communications.
Thank you for attending this session!