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University Relations Crisis Communication Plan

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I. Purpose

A crisis communication plan provides policies and procedures for the coordination of communication 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, bomb threats, natural disasters, or major crimes. Controversial issues may include police investigations, protests, or other situations that demand a public response. The plan is not intended to change the way emergencies are initially reported. All emergencies on campus should be reported immediately to University Police at 911.

This plan not only addresses media relations and communication 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 communication 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.

II. Objectives of the Plan

1. To be able to factually assess situations and determine whether communications responses are warranted.
2. To assemble a Crisis Communication Team that will make recommendations on appropriate responses.
3. To implement immediate actions to:
 - ▶ Identify constituencies that should be informed about the situation.
 - ▶ Communicate facts about the crisis.
 - ▶ Minimize rumors.
 - ▶ Restore order and/or confidence.

III. Procedures

Assessment — The individual who encounters the potential crisis should gather accurate information from the appropriate sources. A potential crisis is defined as an event or situation that could affect or has affected the health, safety, or welfare of students, faculty, staff, or campus visitors. After fact gathering, the appropriate individual should determine whether an immediate response is necessary, and if so, should consult:

Associate Vice President for University Relations. (Backup: Director of College and Media Relations)

The Associate Vice President will determine whether or not to convene a Crisis Communication Team and will immediately inform the President or the Vice President for Development and University Relations.

Assembling Core Crisis Team — Composition of the crisis team will include at minimum (Core Team):

- ▶ Associate Vice President for University Relations
- ▶ University Counsel
- ▶ Department Head or chief contact in area affected
- ▶ Director of College and Media Relations
- ▶ Director of Personnel Services
- ▶ Vice President for Student Affairs
- ▶ Chief of Police
- ▶ Executive Vice President

Other personnel will be added to this core team to form the larger Crisis Communication Team, which will then formulate a response based on the nature of the crisis. Those added could include the following, depending on the situation:

- ▶ President
- ▶ Provost
- ▶ Vice President for Development and University Relations

- ▶ Vice President for Research
- ▶ President's Executive Assistant
- ▶ Dean of the appropriate college
- ▶ Athletic Director
- ▶ Dean of Students
- ▶ Director of University Health Services
- ▶ Director, Virginia Cooperative Extension
- ▶ Director, Virginia Agriculture and Experiment Station
- ▶ Chair of the Faculty Senate
- ▶ Representative, Department of Health & Safety
- ▶ Assistant Vice President for Residential & Dining Programs
- ▶ Vice President for Finance & Treasurer
- ▶ Director of Government Relations

The Core Crisis Team, after assessing the nature and scope of the situation, should call together all members of the Crisis Communication Team to develop a plan of action including some, or all, of the following:

1. **Designate a spokesperson.** In most cases, the spokesperson should be the Associate Vice President for University Relations. The person possessing the direct knowledge of the crisis (for example: the Chief of Police in the event of a campus crime) can be designated as spokesperson by the Associate Vice President for University Relations.
In cases of a significant crisis, the president or the highest ranking university official 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.
2. **Draft a fact sheet.** The fact sheet should contain a summary statement of the situation including all known details to be released to the media. This information should be made available to (and approved by) the President or Provost, and appropriate Dean or Vice President. This fact sheet should be analyzed with respect to the public's right to know and concerns for privacy and security in consultation with General Counsel.
3. **Notify key constituencies.** Determine key constituencies that should be informed of the crisis. It is important to keep administration, 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. Among the groups that should be considered for communication in a crisis situation are:
 - ▶ Law enforcement agencies
 - ▶ Administration, faculty, and staff
 - ▶ Parents of students
 - ▶ Students
 - ▶ Board of Visitors
 - ▶ General public
 - ▶ Mass media
 - ▶ Foundation Boards of Directors
 - ▶ Alumni
4. **Assign member of the Crisis Team** to communicate the facts of the situation (contained in the 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 Police Department representative.
 - ▶ **Administrators, faculty, staff** — Information to administrators other than those selected to serve on the Crisis Team should be provided via facsimile, electronic mail, campus mail, voice mail, and/or mass meetings. Members of the Administrative Council can be automatically e-mailed important updates. This should be handled by University Relations. The computing center can set up specialized broadcast e-mail messages to the Virginia Tech email addresses, but it can segregate only by student or non-student. Contact is Associate Vice President of Information Systems, 231-9592.
 - ▶ **Students** — Notices to students can be submitted for publication to Collegiate Times, on the Web, via email, WUVT, and through mass meetings if needed. Mass meetings can be set up in Cassell Coliseum. Dedicated phone lines with taped messages can also be set up by Communications Network Services. A voice mail broadcast to all resident students can be issued by contacting Communications Network Services at 231-6460. Fliers may be distributed in residence halls.
 - ▶ **Board of Visitors** — May be reached via telephone or facsimile. Phone lists are maintained by the secretary of the Board of Visitors, 231-6231, who should coordinate any correspondence with these bodies.
 - ▶ **Parents of students** — Use the Web home page. The university weather line, 231-6668, can double as a rumor control hotline. Direct mail is also an option.
 - ▶ **Local community** — If the situation has an impact on local residents, fliers can be distributed or use mass media. If appropriate, meetings can be arranged with leaders of the neighborhood associations near the university.
 - ▶ **Mass media** — University Relations may prepare news releases for distribution. All media inquiries should be directed to University Relations.
 - ▶ **Government Agencies** - If government entities (Town Manager, Governor's office, etc.) need to be informed, this should be handled only by the Director of Government Relations or University Relations.
5. **Alert the media.** Determine whether a news conference and or news release is an appropriate means of conveying information to faculty, staff, students, the news media, and the public. University Relations 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 appear, etc.
6. **Establish Crisis Command Center.** Determine whether the magnitude of the crisis merits establishing a Crisis Command Center (for police and university officials) and/or a media briefing center (for larger gatherings of the media for briefings or press conferences). Location to be determined depending on the incident. The department head's office will be the central communications office in a crisis. Department emergency personnel should forward their phones to 1-5396 if out of the office for an extended period.

7. **Photography.** Decide the need 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 and photographs 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.
8. **Radio Responses.** Discuss need to produce taped response for radio, or who to make available for radio sound bites. Soundline is equipped to handle radio reporter's needs. Contact Broadcast Media Coordinator, 231-6997.
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 information staff person to discuss with that individual the idea of making his/her "side of the issue" known to the media. Counsel individual in terms of appropriate ways to deal with the media.
10. **Internal communications.** Determine strategy of internal communications to be used if the crisis affects university students and employees, working closely with Personnel Services, the university newspaper, Spectrum, mass emailing, and the web site. For off-campus only, the center director will handle communications. VCE/VAES communications will be handled via email through the respective director.
11. **Alternative communications.** Discuss alternative or additional means of conveying information including letters to parents of students or selected constituencies of the university, letters to newspaper editors, and consultation with editorial boards. Where appropriate, Virginia Tech will work with local news media, asking them to offer a "hot link" on their web sites to Virginia Tech's web site for viewers wanting more information regarding a crisis.

The Virginia Tech cable system has no way to crawl information over all of its channels at once. Virginia Tech controls channels 2, 6, and 9 and can place a crawl message on them, and can black out other channels to help direct viewers to channels 2, 6, or 9. Adelphia can crawl on every channel and has an agreement with the Town of Blacksburg for that purpose. The town has indicated it would not be a problem for us to do this. In the event of a massive electronic communications failure, the buses can be used as rolling billboards. We could hand-paint large signs and post them on the buses.

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	Contact Person	Phone
Campus switchboard		231-6000
Squires information		231-6906
Personnel Services		231-5303

13. **Rumor control.** Consider establishing a rumor-control hotline and/or a dedicated call-in line for media use. The Virginia Tech Weatherline, 231-6668, can be used for this purpose. A web page with a hot link from the university home page can also be used posting up-to-date information and FAQ. Contact Communications Network Services to arrange for a recorded message or use of the university's back-up telephone lines.
14. **Loss of telephone service.** Cellular phones should be used in the event that land-lines are down. University Relations will maintain a list of cellular phone numbers for key university officials. The department has several hand-held public frequency radios in storage in the department head's suite and with the Director of College and Media Relations. Department emergency personnel can use these for on campus communications in lieu of or in addition to cell phones.

Aftermath Component

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.

Communications

1. Whenever possible, a public forum should be scheduled and coordinated by University 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 University Police, office of Personnel Services, as well as the University Counseling Center 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 upon the nature of the crisis.
2. Immediately following a crisis, it is imperative that the university be sensitive to the needs of faculty, staff, and students who may have been personally affected by the disaster. There may be a need to assist a victim, or victims by obtaining information and/or a referral to available resources. The core team will be responsible for notifying appropriate employees and Student Affairs for students. Also, representatives from the core team and Student Affairs should follow up with their respective constituents to ensure their needs are being addressed and offer further assistance.
3. 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 electronic mail, rumor-control hotlines, etc. and report facts as appropriate. Contact Communications Network Services, 231-6460, to arrange for voice mail broadcasts to faculty/staff, students, and other with voice mail accounts.
4. Depending upon the nature of the crisis, services and assistance may have been rendered by agencies, companies and/or individuals from outside the university. University Relations should ensure that applicable follow-up information, as well as thank-you letters, are forwarded to appropriate persons.
5. The core 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 Crisis Management Plan.

Clean Up

The Physical Plant is responsible for overseeing and implementing services necessary to clean and repair areas and facilities damaged as a result of a crisis. Physical Plant (1-4300) and Communications Network Services (1-6460) contact numbers are supported 24 hours a day, and procedures are in place for appropriate dispatch in response to any emergency.

Facility Evacuation/Operational Shutdowns

It may become necessary to evacuate buildings and/or areas surrounding facilities to protect and ensure the safety of people and in some instances, animals. If such a situation occurs, decisions regarding work space accommodations and/or leave requirements for faculty and staff, as well as class schedules and possibly housing accommodations for students, would need to be addressed.

Issues surrounding leave for staff employees should be directed to Personnel Services. Note: normally time away from work is accounted for through current leave policies.

Student questions should be directed to the Vice President for Student Affairs, and the faculty should address any concerns to the Provost's Office.