



Communications and Technology

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Notification Protocol for Crisis Situations

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Section of Communications and Technology, Larry Whiting, Head
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1. When to put this plan into effect:

A crisis is a turning point with possible bad consequences. As soon as a faculty member, staff member or other employee becomes aware of such a situation that could affect the college or university, that person should notify his or her supervisor immediately. Gaining control over the crisis is easiest within the first 24 hours; all key players should be notified well ahead of that time to decide how to handle the situation.

A crisis requiring this protocol to be put into action is a relatively rare event. However, when one occurs, it's imperative to act quickly.

A crisis can arise at any level of the organization. A graduate student working alone in a lab may be the first to recognize a crisis situation just as easily as the dean. In any case, communication must begin immediately — whether it's up the line of administration, or down.

It's impossible to list all things that could be considered a crisis, but they include: break-ins, lawsuits, potential liability for illness or injury, charges of sexual harassment that are likely to be made public, natural disasters that directly affect the college. Anything that makes you wince if you think the local newspaper's investigative reporter will find out about it certainly is a candidate for this protocol.

2. Whom to notify:

Any employee should immediately notify his or her supervisor, department chairperson, unit director, and/or associate chair of an impending (or at the onset of a) crisis situation. The dean's office should also be immediately contacted:

Bobby D. Moser, (614) 292-1889 or (614) 792-9353 (H)

It is the responsibility of the dean's office to set a time and place for a meeting (see below) and contact the following parties to attend:

a) Communications and Technology unit:

Larry Whiting, (614) 292-2011 or (614) 761-2064 (H)

and one of the following communicators:

Suzanne Steel (Columbus), (614) 292-9637 or (614) 442-0280 (H)

Joy Fischer (Wooster), (216) 263-3777 or (216) 262-3513 (H)

Liana Huff (ATI), (216) 264-3911 or (419) 895-1077 (H)

- The communications office should then immediately notify University Communications:

Earle Holland, (614) 292-8384 or (614) 890-4606 (H)

b) The appropriate associate dean:

Extension: Keith Smith, (614) 292-4067 or (614) 876-8204 (H)

OARDC: Tom Payne, (216) 263-3701 or (216) 263-3608, or (216) 292-3702 (Dr. Nault)

Res. Instruction: L.H. Newcomb, (614) 292-6891 or (614) 876-5574 (H)

ATI: Bill Anderson, (216) 264-3911 ext. 1212 or (216) 263-7992 (H)

Stone Laboratory: Jeff Reutter, (614) 292-8949 or (614) 890-0966 (H)
and John Hageman (419) 285-2341

c) The university's legal representative)

d) Appropriate department chair, unit director and/or Extension assistant director, who

should then notify appropriate faculty and staff, including, when appropriate, the building coordinator of the location in question (if unsure who the current building coordinator is, contact the Office of Physical Facilities, 614-292-6158.)

e) In crime-related crises, campus police also should be notified:

Columbus, (614) 292-2121

Wooster, (216) 264-3911 ext. 1282 or the Wooster Police pager: (614) 646-7535

3. Action steps:

The dean should select appropriate representatives from the above offices to meet in person or via teleconference immediately, or at least within 12 hours, to:

- a) Gather details about the crisis situation.
- b) Determine what additional information/expertise is needed.
- c) Identify targeted audiences who may have a stake in the outcome of the crisis.
- d) Determine what further action is necessary (i.e., Which media representatives should be notified?

Who will handle media notification? Should media access to the situation be limited in any way?)

- e) Decide who should act as spokesperson.
- f) Decide how to communicate plan to faculty and staff, especially those in affected departments.

The dean or a designate should chair this committee. A representative from the Communications and Technology staff always should be included because of the office's expertise with message content and delivery, and experience in serving in a liaison role with the media.

Crisis Protocol Philosophy:

The literature in crisis communications suggests several strategies to successfully handle a crisis situation. The basic premise should always be that **all public statements should be truthful and candid*** In addition, it's important to follow these guidelines:

1. Respond immediately

Resist the temptation to give in to a "siege mentality." It is vital to the credibility of the organization to be up-front about the episode and be responsive to media inquiries within the first 24 hours after the crisis occurs, or sooner.

2. Take control of the message

Referring inquiries to an outside party (a health department, for example, in a health-related crisis) means abdicating the ability to shape the public's perception of what's happening.

3. Gather support

Identifying experts from within the organization is important, but so is identifying respected third parties who will support our position. These supporters should be used to back up our own message, not act as our spokesperson.

4. Work with the media

Crisis communications experts agree: Cooperate with the media. As Judith Ressler points out, "It is journalists' right and duty to represent the public by obtaining as much information as possible about a disaster. If no information is given to reporters, they will dig it out gradually, creating a headline with each new discovery," ("Crisis Communications," *Public Relations Quarterly*, 1982). Treat the media as the messenger, not as the enemy. Daily communication with the media is vital during the first days of the crisis, when reports are likely to appear in the paper on a daily basis. It is extremely helpful for both the media and the organization to have a previously identified spokesperson deliver all messages.

5. Work with victims and other prime audiences

Regular communication with any victims resulting from the crisis and other affected persons must be done in a timely manner. Don't wait until an investigation is completed before making communication. Update audiences with information about what's happening, and express concern for their well-being. If statements must be checked with legal counsel, let audiences know that information might be slow in coming because lawyers must check the statements to protect the organization's legal rights.