



## CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

### I. INTRODUCTION

Dickinson State University's Crisis Communication Plan (CCP) outlines the roles, responsibilities and protocols that will guide the university in promptly sharing information with all of DSU's audiences during an emergency or crisis. The audiences for this plan include students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, neighbors, city leaders, media, the Dickinson community, North Dakota State University officials, and state and federal government officials.

This plan is a part of the university's overall Emergency Management Plan, coordinated through the Office of the Vice President of Student Development, who serves as emergency director under the Emergency Management Plan.

Success of this plan rests on the open, frequent and effective communication between the Crisis Communications Team, the Emergency Management Team and the emergency director.

In a crisis, Dickinson State University must respond immediately and be open and candid in disseminating accurate and complete information to the public. It is in the university's best interest to take a pre-emptive approach to public relations in a crisis and that our preferred strategy will be one of forthcoming disclosure of as much confirmed information as possible. The goal is to minimize speculation, inaccurate reporting, and negative publicity. By acting in this manner, the university has more influence on what the media reports and ameliorates the negative public relations aspects of the crisis as quickly as possible.

Our guiding principle will be to communicate facts as quickly as possible, updating information regularly as circumstances change, to ensure the safety of the DSU community and the continued operation of essential services. Our efforts to be simultaneously accurate and quick may mean that some communications are incomplete. We accept this, knowing that how we communicate in an emergency or a crisis will affect public perceptions of the university. Honesty and speed are the most effective means to avoid lasting damage to the institution and widespread second-guessing by the public, which expects immediate access to accurate information. In a crisis, people will likely expect us to have more information than we may actually have. That makes it imperative to speak with accuracy about what we know and not to speculate about details we do not know.

We will use multiple mediums to reach as many people as possible with accurate, timely information. This is especially important in the first hours and days of an emergency or a crisis. Our goal is to be open, accountable and accessible to all audiences, although mindful of legal and privacy concerns.

For the purposes of this plan, a crisis is defined as a significant event that prompts significant, often sustained, news coverage and public scrutiny and has the potential to damage the institution's reputation,

image or financial stability. A crisis could be precipitated by an emergency or a controversy. An emergency is a fire, hurricane, crime that presents an ongoing threat or other event that involves a response from police, fire or emergency medical personnel. A controversy could be student protests or employee misconduct.

## **II. PREPARING FOR A CRISIS**

It is important to set up the framework of the Crisis Communication Plan in advance. Some steps that should be taken in advance are:

- **Form a Crisis Communication Team**

The Crisis Communications Team consists of university officials who understand what their duties will be during a crisis. The team will meet at least annually to ensure that all members are aware of their responsibilities and to review the crisis communications plan. Team members include:

- ✓ President
- ✓ Emergency Management Plan coordinator (Vice-President of Student Development)
- ✓ Vice-President of Academic Affairs
- ✓ Vice-President of Business Affairs
- ✓ Director of University Relations
- ✓ Director of Computer Services
- ✓ News Bureau Manager
- ✓ Webmaster
- ✓ Secretary

- **Provide the Crisis Communication Team and other key personnel with emergency communication training**

Crisis team members and other selected individuals should receive professional training that will provide them with the confidence and competence to properly handle the communications aspect of a crisis.

- **Compile all phone and cell numbers and e-mail addresses for key officials and develop a communications tree**

If a crisis occurs after hours, Crisis Communication Team members and other important university officials will need to be reached at home or other locations. These numbers should be compiled BEFORE a crisis strikes, and should be continuously updated. Also, a calling hierarchy, indicating who is responsible for calling whom, should be agreed upon.

- **Compile all local and statewide emergency numbers**

A crisis on the DSU campus may affect the Dickinson community and surrounding area. It is important for the university to maintain contact with city, county, state and selected federal officials.

- **List possible locations for command/media center**

Consider where the Crisis Communication Team will meet if a crisis strikes. The location should take into account technological infrastructure, food and bathroom facilities, proximate parking for news crews and satellite trucks, and related needs. In addition, the university may want to offer reporters a work space or a place where they can attend news briefings or receive updates.

- **Prepare standby statements**

Draft standby statements that have been vetted ahead of time. Accurate details can be inserted at the time of the crisis. It may not say much, but it's critical that the university put out something right away to show that it is committed to addressing the crisis.

- **Prepare and distribute a crisis kit**

The crisis kit should contain all of the above items and lists. It should also include a campus directory, a Dickinson phone book, media lists and phone numbers and city and state maps.

- **Prepare a media kit**

The kit should include general information about DSU that would be useful to the media regardless of the nature of the emergency.

- **Develop a crisis Web homepage**

In a crisis, the university's Web site will be one of the most important communication channels. It will become a beacon for thousands of people looking for accurate and precise information. Traffic to the site will increase dramatically, so we need to ensure that the site and servers will function even in the middle of an emergency.

- **Establish a crisis hotline**

A toll free telephone number (e.g., 1-800-DSU-INFO) with continuously updated messages can provide an ongoing source of information for both the on-campus and off-campus communities.

- **Communicate the plan in advance**

This plan should be communicated to the media and the university community before a crisis strikes. If the media and the university's audiences know it exists and how/where to refer to it, they will know what to expect from the university when a crisis occurs. This will allow the crisis communications process to move more smoothly. Presenting the plan at fall orientation and regularly scheduled workshops throughout the year would keep the crisis communication plan "top of mind" for faculty, staff and students.

### III. RESPONDING TO A CRISIS

#### ACTION:

##### **1. Convene the Crisis Communication Team**

The Crisis Communication Team will convene when the emergency director or his designate officially declares an emergency. All available team members should immediately meet at the command center and decide the first course of action. Since this must be done swiftly, if not all team members are available at the outset of the crisis, the available members should take the lead and then bring in the rest of the team as they become available.

##### **2. Notify the campus of the emergency**

The Emergency Management Plan Coordinator or his designee will send the appropriate NotiFind message to alert faculty, staff and students that a particular emergency situation has occurred/is occurring. If the coordinator is unavailable, the Director of University Relations will send the message.

##### **3. Notify key agencies and officials of the emergency**

Alert appropriate first responder agencies and key city, county, state, federal and North Dakota University System officials that an emergency situation has occurred/is occurring.

##### **4. Activate all relevant campus safety plans**

The Crisis Communication Team members should make sure that all applicable safety plans and measures are carried out immediately. Every second counts during a crisis.

##### **5. Take immediate action to ensure the safety of students, faculty, staff, visitors and nearby residents**

If the safety of the DSU community is at risk, immediate action will be taken. This action should be the first decision by the Crisis Communication Team. In a crisis, the goal is to issue the first communication to university audiences within 30 minutes of notification of the event, with regular updates as needed. Some situations may require even faster initial communications.

##### **6. Designate a command center and media center**

The first choice for a crisis command center is the Agriculture Building. The crisis communications team will assemble here to gather information, assess the situation, monitor communications, make decisions, and communicate with the media. This facility can provide accommodations (food, refreshments, toilet and bathing facilities, etc.) for media reps and a central location for press conferences. (Scott Gymnasium will serve as the command center if the Ag Building is unavailable.)

##### **7. Communicate with key audiences**

###### **A. Gather the facts**

University officials must immediately gather all available facts and channel them to the Crisis Communication Team. The information should be compiled into a fact sheet which can be used to update Web sites, e-mails, news releases and other communications channels.

###### **B. Designate a university spokesperson**

The university should designate one spokesperson to provide a unified, consistent message to the public. The spokesperson must be kept informed of the latest developments, so it is essential that emergency personnel, police, city and state officials, campus administrators, etc. keep the spokesperson updated. In most situations, the spokesperson will be the Director of University Relations.

**C. Designate a secretary**

Select an individual who can maintain meeting notes, to-do lists, information files on the ongoing crisis and other items.

**D. Assign an individual to monitor media coverage**

Designate a member of the Crisis Communications Team to monitor media coverage and anticipate any problems in the way information is flowing to the news media. This person also should keep a list of all reporters to whom university officials speak. This will enable the university to look for news clippings and to later evaluate how the crisis was covered.

**E. Identify key audiences**

Determine which of the university's audiences need to be informed of the situation and in which order:

- Students, faculty, staff
- North Dakota University System
- Media
- Parents
- General public
- Alumni
- Other

**F. Develop messages**

The Crisis Communication Team should tailor the standby statement to the events that are unfolding, and prepare background information for the media. In addition, they should develop a few clear, simple messages for use on the Web site, telephone emergency hotline, cable television, and other appropriate channels. The messages should demonstrate concern about what is happening and for the people involved, and should explain what the university is doing to solve the problem.

**G. Anticipate the tough questions**

The Crisis Communication Team should make a list of all possible tough questions that the media or the public might ask. By composing responses to these questions, the spokesperson can be better prepared for interviews and press briefings.

**H. Identify which mediums are available to communicate the message**

The time of day, day of the week, whether it's a holiday and whether there is a power outage or not will help determine which methods of communication can be used to communicate the message(s).

**I. Communicate the message and the facts**

The facts of the crisis, an official statement and the key message(s) should be communicated to the university's audiences. Internal audiences should be informed first. For external audiences, use the media by holding press briefings or issuing official statements. The first press briefing or statement should be issued as soon as possible.

**J. Activate the crisis Web homepage**

Use the scaled-down site to communicate essential and up-to-date information to key audiences.

**K. Activate the crisis hotline number**

Activate the number that can be updated to include a specific message or to take calls from concerned parents and students. This number should be activated and publicized in the event of a crisis. In particular, if students are involved in a crisis, their parents will need a number to call to find out if their children are in danger, need to be evacuated, etc.

**L. Provide guidance to the public**

If the crisis involves a health risk, university officials should research the risk and offer guidance to the public about symptoms, treatments, and to contact physicians. If the crisis involves an evacuation, university officials should inform the public about areas to be evacuated and time lines for the evacuation. The university also should direct the public on where to go for more information: radio, television, Web sites, etc.

**M. Control the message**

The university should stick to the facts and to its main messages, thus controlling what information is disseminated. This information should be truthful and forthcoming. All "bad" news should be told upfront and all at once, otherwise it will trickle out slowly and the negative media coverage will continue day after day.

**N. Control the flow of information**

The Crisis Communication Team should control the flow of information by holding a series of press briefings for the media – weekly, daily or hourly, depending on the nature of the crisis. This enables the university to operate in a proactive manner, while providing the media with a timetable for when they can expect an update. All Crisis Communication Team members who work with the media should be briefed on the situation and informed as to what they can release. Other university officials who answer phones should be informed of where and how to direct media calls.

**O. Respond to the media quickly and fairly**

The media provides a way for the university to get its message to the public. The media also will shape public opinion about how the university is responding to the crisis. Therefore, it is important to cooperate with the media, to be sensitive to media deadlines and to provide all reporters with the same information – no exclusive stories.

**P. Dispel the rumors**

During times of crisis, rumors run rampant. If false rumors become prevalent, the spokesperson will need to dispel them publicly. When discussing students who have been affected by the crisis, check to make sure which information about them can be released publicly. Do not release the names of anyone who is injured or killed until their parents/families have been notified. Also, issue joint press releases with city and state officials, if necessary. When the crisis is citywide or statewide, the crisis communications team should stay in contact with city and state officials, and possibly issue joint or complementary press releases with those officials.

**Q. Develop a plan to assist those who have been affected**

Determine what the university can do to help those individuals or groups that have been affected by the crisis. Consider things such as grief counseling, mental health services, support groups, memorial services, safety seminars, poster and brochures that offer safety tips, hotline numbers that provide information to family members, and so on.

**R. Meet with city, state officials, if necessary**

If the crisis affects areas beyond the DSU campus, university officials should be in contact with city and state officials. DSU officials and members of the emergency response team will meet with other state officials to compare information and represent DSU in the decision-making process.

#### **IV. EVALUATING OUR RESPONSE TO A CRISIS**

**F. View/read media coverage**

The best way to evaluate the university's dealings with the media is to watch and read the media coverage of the crisis. Seeing how each of the university's actions was covered by the press can help form future media strategies.

**G. Debrief**

The crisis communications team should convene after the crisis ends to evaluate every action taken and the crisis communication plan itself. It is important to learn from successes and from mistakes.

**H. Test the plan**

To ensure that this plan works and is kept up to date, it should be tested and evaluated annually.