

# Level of Preparedness for Managing Crisis Communication on Land-Grant Campuses

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## Abstract

Crisis situations can occur in any organization. Because they attract media attention and public scrutiny, crises demand effective intervention and response. Despite their importance, there has never been an inventory of crisis communication readiness at land-grant universities. This study used mail survey techniques to query communication administrators at 1862 and 1890 U.S. land-grant colleges of agriculture as to the level of preparedness that exists for handling crisis situations at their institutions. A major finding was that only about 60 percent of land-grant universities have a central crisis communication plan. Nearly one third of the respondents were unaware of a crisis communication plan at their university. Official crisis plans were most often found at the university level, followed by extension. Experiment station crisis plans were reported by fewer than one fourth of respondents, an alarming finding since research programs and facilities are considerably more susceptible to public outcry or threats from fringe groups. It was determined that faculty and staff are often not aware of crisis plans in place at their institutions and that communication professionals have limited involvement in the development of such plans. Findings highlight the need for communication professionals to be more proactive in assuring that crisis communication plans are in place and that they are involved in their development.

## Introduction

Every organization, whether public or private, wishes to maintain a favorable public image. Unplanned events, however, often place in jeopardy an organization's public credibility and reputation. The catalytic situation may originate from within the organization or external to the organization. A situation becomes an immediate "crisis" communication problem when it draws extensive media attention and requires a public response through media. The stakes are high in crisis management and the margin for error low (Barton, 2000).

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No organization welcomes negative press, but even land-grant institutions occasionally find themselves confronting the general public or specific special interest groups who may question the institutions' policies and programs. This scrutiny can occur despite the longstanding mission of land-grant experiment stations and extension services to develop and extend objective, science-based information to help people improve their standard of living. Contemporary issues such as animal rights and animal care, the development of large-scale dairy and hog production facilities, food irradiation and other food safety-related matters may heighten public concerns and media attention aimed at land-grant universities.

While controversial public issues often originate outside of the organization, internal activities, such as criminal or unethical behaviors on the part of organizational personnel, can also attract unexpected and extensive media attention. Accidents are another common type of crisis that can change public perceptions about the organization (Irvine & Millar, 1996). Coombs (1999) noted that the perception of human error on the part of the organization can produce stronger negative perceptions than crises brought about by natural disasters. Compounding the crisis potential at land-grant universities is the presence of a large population of young, single students, many experiencing independence for the first time in their lives (Duke & Masland, 2002).

A relatively new but serious crisis threat at land-grant universities is the potential for bio-terrorism from fringe groups that advocate disruption and destruction of research efforts both in campus labs and on experimental farms. Land-grant universities have diligently implemented security measures and protocols to protect facilities and scientists. Considerably less attention is generally given to strategies for dealing with news media and the content of mass media messages should such a crisis occur.

Given the constant threat of crisis and the uncertainty of system-wide preparedness, there is a need for data to help assess and improve the preparedness of the land-grant system in dealing with crisis situations. There is no published research that focuses specifically on the status of crisis communication plans at land-grant universities.

**Purpose of the study.** The purpose of this research was to assess the preparedness of U.S. land-grant colleges of agriculture for handling crisis situations at their institutions. The following questions were formulated to guide this study:

- 1) Are crisis communication plans in place at land-grant colleges of agriculture?
- 2) Have crisis communication plans ever been implemented and, if so, under what circumstances?

- 3) Who developed the crisis communication plans?
- 4) Did communication professionals have input into the crisis plans?
- 5) To what degree are faculty and staff informed about such plans?

### Literature Review

Throughout the more than 100 years of the land-grant system, there has always been the potential for and actual instances of crisis situations. However, the topic has had major notoriety for only the past 20 years or so. Burnett (1998) traces the genesis of effective crisis management to 1982, when Johnson & Johnson was forced to announce that some of its Tylenol pain relief capsules had been laced with cyanide. The company's proactive public response to this situation is often cited by communication experts as a model for crisis managers to follow. In the years following this incident, a large literature has developed on crisis communication.

One problem noted in the literature is that communication practitioners often incorrectly equate crisis communication with risk communication. They are not the same. According to Scherer and Baker (1996<sub>a</sub>) risk communication "...is a process of transmitting information to the public about risk assessment findings and risk management decisions" (p. 252). In risk communication, the public is provided information about potential hazards so that they can make informed choices about accepting or avoiding a particular risk situation. A wide variety of "hazards" are subsumed under risk communication, including those that could affect one's food or health or the physical or economic environment in which one lives or works.

Crisis communication is much different in that it involves incidents that suddenly and unpredictably threaten the stability of an organization. The crisis might come about based on a false negative perception about the organization or its programs or, for that matter, a legitimate claim or allegation (Scherer & Baker, 1996<sub>b</sub>). Others, such as Coombs (2002), describe crises as having the potential to disrupt an organization's operations to the point that the organization may not function properly. In such cases, clients may change their perceptions of the organization, thus threatening the organization's reputation and quite possibly its survival. Because they draw media attention and public scrutiny, crises demand effective intervention and response (Stanton, 2002).

Fink (1986) indicates that a crisis is an unstable time in which a decisive change is eminent with a possibility of a highly undesirable outcome. Caponigro (2000) proposes that crisis managers and communicators strive to minimize the potential for reputation damage, gain control of the situation, and take advantage of any benefits that may result from the crisis. Much

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crisis communication literature is prescriptive and uses a case-study approach to discuss different “real-life” crisis situations and the varying level of success experienced by various companies and industries in dealing with these crises (Fearn-Banks, 2002; Caponigro, 2000). A special report published by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) in 1994 focused specifically on crises at educational institutions and offered advice in planning for and preventing negative consequences (CASE, 1994).

While crisis situations can differ dramatically across companies and industries, the consensus in the literature is that organizations can and should formulate a crisis communication plan in advance to mitigate potentially negative consequences and reduce uncertainties in the event of a crisis (Seeger, Sellnow & Ulmer, 2001; Penrose 2000). Much literature has focused on characteristics of crisis communication plans and tips for creating effective plans. Most plans provide information on the organization’s policies and goals and provide a checklist or guide to follow in the event of a crisis (Fearn-Banks, 2002). Plans also typically identify the organization’s most important and valued publics and provide information on how and by whom they will be contacted at the outset of the crisis (Caponigro, 2000).

The roles played by public relations and communication managers and their relationship to administrative management also have received attention in the literature because of their influence on an organization’s ability to manage crises. Much of the most widely cited work on public relations roles and practice is associated with James E. Grunig of the University of Maryland and his colleagues (Grunig, 2001; 1992; Grunig & Grunig, 2000). One of Grunig’s major contributions is the development of four models,<sup>1</sup> or ideal types, intended to describe the way corporate public relations and communication programs are administered, along with recommendations on improving such programs. This work focuses on the roles played by individual communication practitioners, particularly the extent to which they are involved in top management of the organization. According to the literature, organizations that involve communication heads in management decision-making are more likely to have effective public relations programs than organizations that relegate their communication heads to largely technician roles (Fearn-Banks, 2001; Dozier, 1992). The latter organizations are less likely to engage in recommended communication practices and are less likely to recover quickly from or avoid damages associated with crisis situations.

### Methods

Mail survey methods were used in this study. The population included all communication administrators for 1862 and 1890 land-grant colleges of agriculture. A list containing names and addresses of current communication

administrators was obtained from the USDA Cooperative State Research and Extension Education Service in mid-2003 for use in the study. The initial list contained 88 names and addresses of those personnel. Some states had more than one communication operation, typically one representing extension and the other serving academic and experiment station programs. In such cases, both communication administrators were included in the study. In several other cases, adjustments to the list were necessary because positions were vacant and it was not possible to identify the person who should respond for those institutions. Also, some institutions had names listed other than communication administrators. These names were omitted, resulting in a corrected mailing list of 71 names.

A two-page, legal-size questionnaire was developed by the researchers to meet the needs of this study. The questionnaire requested professional background information from respondents, characteristics of their departments, and the status of crisis communication plans at their universities. In addition, seven Likert-type items were modified from Dozier (1992) to measure respondents' perceived roles as communication administrators. Validity of the questionnaire was assessed through field testing with a panel of professional communicators from the Ohio State Section of Communications and Technology. Based on the field test, several items were rephrased to enhance clarity. Item analysis was used to assess reliability for the perceived-role scale on the questionnaire, resulting in an acceptable alpha coefficient of .84 (Mueller, 1986).

Elements of Dillman's (2000) tailored design method were used in the data collection phase of the study. An e-mail announcement preceded the initial first-class mailing of the survey packet. The packet contained the questionnaire, a self-addressed, stamped return envelope, and a cover letter that explained the purpose of the study, provided examples of crisis situations, and requested participation. About two weeks later, a second e-mail message was sent as a reminder, followed by a second survey packet to nonrespondents. Follow-up phone calls were made to encourage completion of the questionnaire among nonrespondents. A total of 44 usable questionnaires were returned from 38 states, resulting in an overall response rate of 62 percent. Results reported in the following section are generalized only to respondents and not to the population.

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, including means, frequencies and percentages, are presented and discussed.

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## Results

Results reported in this section provide selected information about respondents, their communication departments, perceived roles as communication administrators, and status of crisis communication plans at their universities. Respondents were shown to vary greatly in the amount of time served in their current positions, with responses ranging from one to 31 years. The modal number of years served in the current position was five years. A large majority (86.4%) of respondents indicated they were not tenured, and only two respondents (4.5%) indicated holding tenure-track positions. In addition, 41 different job titles were provided by the respondents. These titles ranged from "news director" to "associate dean for communications." In between were "department head," "chairman," "coordinator," "leader," and "program manager."

One fourth of the respondents indicated that a bachelor's degree was the highest degree they had earned, while nearly half (47.7%) indicated they had earned a master's degree. Fewer than one fourth (22.7%) reported they had earned a doctoral degree.

Nearly all (97.7%) of the respondents reported that their communication departments served extension or outreach. Nearly three fourths (72.7%) indicated their departments served experiment station or research entities, while more than half (59.1%) indicated serving academic or teaching programs.

A set of seven items was used to measure respondents' perceptions of their roles as communication administrators. As shown in Table 1, item means ranged from 2.93 to 3.78 on the five-point scale, indicating weak to nearly moderate perceptions of involvement in institutional strategic planning and decision-making. A majority of respondents indicated they routinely encouraged university administrators to follow established communication practices and helped them to stay abreast of public opinion. More than two thirds (70.5%) of the respondents indicated pointing out to administrators the need to follow a systematic public relations planning process, while somewhat fewer (63.6%) said they kept administrators informed of public reaction to various university policies and actions. More than two thirds (68.2%) of the respondents indicated taking "significant responsibility" for the success or failure of their college's public relations program.

**Table 1.** Respondents' Perceived Roles as Communication Administrators, Presented in Percentages (N = 44)

| Statement  | Level of Agreement |          |                            |       |                | Mean | SD   |
|--|--------------------|----------|----------------------------|-------|----------------|------|------|
|  | Strongly Disagree  | Disagree | Neither Agree Nor Disagree | Agree | Strongly Agree |      |      |
| a. In meetings with administrators, I point out the need to follow a systematic public relations planning process. | 4.5                | 6.8      | 15.9                       | 50.0  | 20.5           | 3.78 | 1.02 |
| b. I take significant responsibility for the success or failure of my college's public relations program.          | 6.8                | 20.5     | 4.5                        | 45.5  | 22.7           | 3.57 | 1.25 |
| c. I keep administrators informed of public reactions to university policies, procedures, and/or actions.          | 5.5                | 22.7     | 6.8                        | 50.0  | 13.6           | 3.47 | 1.14 |
| d. Other department heads consider me the college's expert in handling public relations problems.                  | 9.1                | 25.0     | 13.6                       | 40.9  | 11.4           | 3.20 | 1.21 |
| e. I am often held accountable for the success or failure of public relations programs.                            | 13.6               | 13.6     | 20.5                       | 45.5  | 6.8            | 3.18 | 1.19 |
| f. I make most communication policy decisions.   | 9.1                | 29.5     | 25.0                       | 25.0  | 11.4           | 3.00 | 1.18 |
| g. I am heavily involved in administrative decision-making.  | 13.6               | 22.7     | 27.3                       | 25.0  | 9.1            | 2.93 | 1.20 |

**Note:** Items are scaled 1 to 5, strongly disagree to strongly agree. MD = missing data; SD = standard deviation.

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Additional results reported in Table 1 indicate that respondents are less sure about their roles in communication policy and administrative decision-making. Fewer than half of the respondents agreed with the statement that they made most communication policy decisions (36.4%) or were heavily involved in administrative decision-making (34.1%). About one fourth of the respondents indicated they neither agreed nor disagreed with either of the two statements.

A series of items focused on the presence and characteristics of crisis communication plans in place at respondents' home institutions. As shown in Table 2, more than half (59.1%) of the respondents reported that an official crisis plan was in place at the university level.

**Table 2.** *Presence of a Formal or Official Crisis Communication Plan in Place for University and Various Divisions, Presented in Percentages (N= 44)*

|                               | Yes  | No   | Don't Know | MD  |
|-------------------------------|------|------|------------|-----|
| a. University                 | 59.1 | 15.9 | 20.5       | 4.5 |
| b. Extension division         | 36.4 | 52.3 | 9.1        | 2.3 |
| c. Experiment station         | 22.7 | 40.9 | 29.5       | 6.8 |
| d. Academic/teaching programs | 18.2 | 43.2 | 31.8       | 6.8 |

MD = Missing data

More than one third (36.4%) of the respondents indicated a crisis plan was in place for extension, while less than one fourth said a plan was in place for either their experiment station (22.7%) or academic or teaching programs (18.2%). More than a quarter of the respondents said they did not know if an official crisis plan was in place for their experiment station (29.5%) or academic or teaching programs (31.8%).

Respondents were asked to indicate what actors were involved in the development of their crisis plans. Of the 30 respondents<sup>2</sup> reporting awareness of a plan, nearly a third (30%) indicated the plan was developed largely by professional communicators in their department, while a similar number indicated the plan was developed largely by administrators. Three (10%) of the respondents indicated they were primarily responsible for developing the plan, while about one fourth listed other actors, such as university administrators and university communication or public relations directors.

Regarding implementation of the plan, less than half (43.3%) indicated that the plan had been implemented at least once, while more than one fourth (26.7%) indicated the plan had not been implemented. Four (13.3%) of the respondents did not know whether the plan had been implemented. A separate item was used to determine how many times the plan had been

implemented in the past five years. Two respondents indicated the plan had been implemented as many as five times during the past five years, while three indicated the plan had been implemented four times.

Several open-ended questions were included in the research to gather information on the nature of incidents that had led to use of the crisis plan as well as respondents' judgments as to the plan's usefulness. Some of the issues that prompted implementation of crisis communication plans involved a 4-H trip bus accident, an arrest of an international student with suspected links to a terrorist organization, "spoiled" turkeys sold by a student poultry club, anthrax found on campus, and an employee arrested and terminated. Other responses, such as college budget cuts and faculty layoffs, possibly indicate some level of confusion on the part of respondents as to the definition and nature of crisis communication. There were 12 positive responses and one negative response ("Don't think so") to a question asking if use of the crisis plan was helpful. Positive comments included the following excerpts:

"Yes, it helped identify the chain of command and helped control information that was disseminated. It provides control during a chaotic event."

"Yes, it enabled us to respond quickly and appropriately. It also allowed for proper information sharing between the college, the university, and state/federal governments."

"The execution benefited from a coordinated, collaborative approach."

Findings reported in Table 3 indicate that a large majority of respondents believe that their administrators are somewhat or well informed of the crisis plan. However, less than half of the respondents believe that either faculty (43.3%) or staff (46.6%) are somewhat or well informed.

**Table 3.** *Extent to Which Various Groups are Informed of Crisis Plan, Presented in Percentages (N=30)*

| Group             | Not Informed | Somewhat Informed | Well Informed | Don't Know | MD   |
|-------------------|--------------|-------------------|---------------|------------|------|
| a. Administrators | 3.3          | 40.0              | 40.0          | 3.3        | 13.3 |
| b. Faculty        | 33.4         | 33.3              | 10.0          | 10.0       | 13.3 |
| c. Staff          | 36.7         | 43.3              | 3.3           | 3.3        | 13.3 |

MD = Missing data

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Regarding accessibility to the plan, 24 respondents (80%) reported that the plan was partially or wholly in written form. Five respondents (16.7%) indicated the plan was accessible via the Web.

### Discussion

A major finding from this study is that only about 60 percent of responding land-grant universities have a central crisis communication plan. This finding mirrors the lack of effective crisis communication plans that has been documented among private sector companies (Seeger et al., 2001; Penrose, 2000; Burnett, 1998). Nearly one third of the respondents were unaware of a crisis communication plan in place for their experiment station and academic programs. Nine percent of the respondents were unaware of extension plans. Findings also revealed that less than 50 percent of both faculty and staff were thought to be well informed about the plan in place at their institution.

Results also show that a significant number of respondents perceive they are not responsible for communication policy formation or administrative decision-making, or they are uncertain about their roles. Several respondents also questioned their public relations role in several of the questionnaire's open-ended items, indicating their purpose was limited to producing and disseminating educational materials. They acknowledged that they produced news releases, but viewed this effort as an educational effort, not public relations. Several communication managers, particularly from smaller institutions, believed that public relations and media relations were a responsibility of their university's central administration and not theirs. Some seemed uncertain if crisis communication was in fact their responsibility.

Contributing to this ambiguity may be the fact that 41 different job titles were mentioned by respondents, and only a few involved faculty rank. The lack of faculty status could lessen the opportunity for permanency in a position and may lead to higher turnover rates. These findings may also account for the relatively small proportion of communication managers who claimed to be significantly involved in the development of crisis communication plans at their institutions.

A final issue raised by this research is a possible misunderstanding of the definition of "crisis" as it is typically defined in the communications literature. When completing the open-ended portion of the questionnaire, several respondents listed crisis examples dealing with natural disasters, such as hurricanes or wildfires, or problems with the organization's budget or

funding. While these issues have the *potential* to become crisis situations for the university, the examples did not address how or whether the university's reputation was affected.

### Recommendations

Study findings point to the need for better coordination and collaboration among communication managers and university administrators in land-grant colleges of agriculture. Specific roles and responsibilities need to be sorted out and protocols established. Communication units must have advance awareness of the roles they will play in crisis situations.

Because experiment stations were less likely than other university divisions except academic/teaching programs to have crisis communication plans in place, they need to be more proactive in developing such plans if their operations are not covered by central administration or college administration. Of all college of agriculture units, agricultural research components arguably face the greatest potential threat for crisis communication issues. Such threats may suggest the need for land-grant communicators to develop a "dark site," which is essentially a crisis-ready Web site. The site is placed on a password-protected Web site where it can be accessed immediately when a crisis occurs. Guiniven (2004) notes that U.S. dairy associations established a dark site in the wake of the 2001 foot-and-mouth disease outbreak in Europe. He indicates that dark sites date back to at least 1998, when Swissair Flight 111 crashed off the coast of Nova Scotia, killing all 229 people aboard. Swissair's dark site was activated within minutes of the tragedy, providing information to its publics and establishing the value of such sites. Adam Brown of Atlanta's eKetchum public relations firm estimates that about 80 percent of a dark site can be built before it is actually needed. He said such sites often have a generic first page and "click-ons" that lead media and consumers to different information (Guiniven, 2004).

In addition, the study findings indicate only limited involvement of communication professionals in developing crisis communication plans. Only 10 percent of the respondents who said they had crisis plans in place participated in developing the plan, and only 30 percent indicated other communication personnel were involved. College administrators need to involve their professional communicators, particularly media relations personnel, in such efforts. Communication managers need to be proactive to ensure they are included in crisis planning at the outset.

The literature reviewed in this paper supports this recommendation because organizations that involve their communication heads in management decision-making are more likely to have successful public relations programs than organizations that do not follow this practice.<sup>3</sup> Because

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administrative structures and cultures vary greatly throughout the land grant complex, communication administrators are likely to encounter different challenges and barriers in their attempts to assume greater management responsibilities, if that is their goal. There is also little homogeneity across communication units in terms of where they are in the organizational structure of land grant institutions. In a few cases, there are two communication units per campus, one most likely serving the extension service and a second serving academic programs and the experiment station. In some organizational structures, extension functions university-wide and is administered independently from the college of agriculture. The complexity of organizational structures underscores the need for greater coordination among communication units and university administrators on land grant campuses. More dialogue is also needed among communication administrators as to their ideal, or desired, level of involvement in management decision-making.

A final recommendation resulting from this study is a call for additional training for administrators, faculty, and staff to ensure that all personnel are knowledgeable about the crisis communication plan in place and how and when it should be implemented. This training is particularly important for department chairpersons and other supervisors, who should understand the unique needs and challenges of crisis communication and how these differ from risk communication.

Organizations such as ACE can play an important role in improving crisis communication expertise among land grant institutions by providing a forum for ongoing discussion among its membership as well as an avenue for planning and conducting further research on the topic.

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### **Keywords:**

Crisis communication, media relations, land-grant

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The four models are press agency/publicity, public information, two-way symmetrical, and two-way asymmetrical.

<sup>2</sup>Of the 44 respondents in this study, 14 indicated they were unaware of a crisis plan in place for their university or for its extension, experiment station, or academic or teaching program components. These respondents were excluded from further analyses, which focused on characteristics and use of crisis communication plans.

<sup>3</sup>This assertion was somewhat supported by our study in results not reported here. Respondents who reported taking significant responsibility for their college's PR program, keeping administrators informed of public reactions to the university, being viewed as their college's PR expert, making most policy decisions, and being heavily involved in administrative decision-making were more likely to report the presence of a crisis communication plan in place at their institution. Those who reported less or no involvement in these activities were less likely to report the presence of a plan at their institution.

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