CSC Playbook Series:

Active Shooter—Prepare, Respond, & Recover

Tragically, active shooter events on college campuses are something for which every institution must prepare. APLU’s Council on Strategic Communications has developed a series of playbooks, with support and expertise from Blue Moon Consulting Group, to help you begin to think about the work your campus needs to do to prepare for, respond to, and recover from such a tragic event. Our goal is to share with our members best practice and lessons learned from peer institutions with a specific focus on emergency and strategic communications.

This series is comprised of three parts:

**Part 1: Prepare** — Building for an Effective Response

**Part 2: Respond** — Meeting the Immediate Information Needs of Your Community

**Part 3: Recover** — Providing the Emotional, Humanitarian, and Strategic Support Necessary to Move Forward
Part One: Prepare
Building for an Effective Response

In an active shooter situation, clear, timely, aligned, and consistent communication is absolutely critical both for the response itself as well as the perception of the response.

How you meet the communications needs of various stakeholders can make a difference in the effectiveness of the emergency response.

How the university responds, from the first critical moments to the days, months, and even years of recovery, will shape the perceptions of the actions, decision-making, credibility, and overall leadership of an institution.
HOW PREPARED IS YOUR COMMUNICATIONS TEAM?

In a crisis, the easy things are hard, and the difficult are seemingly impossible. If your school has been fortunate enough to have avoided any major issues or events, it can be easy to fall prey to two pervasive myths:

Believing a Talented Team is Enough
Having smart, effective team members is important; however, relying solely on “smart people” in the room—at any level of the response—simply isn’t enough.

This is especially true if you have newer members who haven’t experienced a significant issue, crisis, or even an exercise with your team.

An active shooter event will put profound personal and professional pressure on your team—events are unfolding rapidly, verifiable facts are scarce, the demand for information is high, and the community your team loves is under siege.

At this most critical moment, when you most need your team to perform at its peak, it will become clear that the very day-to-day processes you and they rely on are simply not engineered to navigate these treacherous and fast-moving waters.

To make matters worse, once the initial response has passed, the second-guessing and investigations will begin. Every move a university team makes in this high-stakes and emotionally charged environment will be scrutinized and judged.

Surviving Covid Equates to Being Battle-Tested
Unfortunately, and perhaps ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic provides a false sense of security for many schools. When faced with a serious crisis teams pulled together, heroes appeared from unexpected corners, and the vast majority of colleges and universities were able to—if not emerge triumphant, at least “figure it out” to the general satisfaction of their community.

However, some of the very best approaches schools used—in particular, broad collaboration across the institution—simply will not work in an emergency when time is of the essence.
The Incident Command Structure (ICS) used by emergency responders nationwide was developed because of a failed response in the 1970s to a wildfire event in southern California. It ultimately was determined that the problem was not a failure of tactics or resources but a failure of management—a lack of clear roles, responsibilities, and structure for collaboration.

Institute a Disciplined and Practiced Approach
So, if there is only one thing that you do to prepare your team for the unimaginable, it should be to develop and exercise a crisis communications plan. In fact, research has shown that the single biggest predictor of success in an emergency is having a documented and recently practiced plan in place—a plan that clearly delineates:

- Roles
- Responsibilities
- Processes
- Coordination with communicators across the institution, leadership and key decision makers, and other emergency responders both internal and within the broader community

Training and exercising on this plan—at least annually—with the core and extended teams, primaries and backups, both individually as a crisis communications team and in conjunction with emergency operations and leadership/crisis management—helps move your team from a place of theoretical understanding to a practiced capability.

KNOW WHERE YOUR TEAM PLUGS INTO THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE
An active shooter event will test:
- The effectiveness of your police department
- The capabilities of your emergency operations team
- The decision-making and strategic abilities of your leadership/crisis management team

It will also challenge your ability to:
- Provide accurate and timely information
- Keep control of the narrative
- Contain the spread of rumors
- Protect the reputation of the institution and its leadership

Effective crisis response requires collaboration, coordination, and clarity on roles and expectations.

Review the Emergency Operations Plan
Many schools have developed Emergency Operations Plans based on generic federal or state plans that, while appropriate for major regional disasters, simply do not provide the direction or detail necessary in a higher education environment.
In particular, the leadership in emergency plans—sometimes called the Executive Policy Group (EPG)—and communications roles tend to be lacking or, conversely, the plans conflate operational and strategic communications.

It may appear that Emergency Support Function (ESF) Communications Job Aids—FEMA-generated, standardized guidance included in many school plans—provide this direction. Yet a close read will make it clear where they fall short. In particular, the ESF tends to view the communications team through a very narrow, media-focused lens as opposed to the more strategic—and imperative—role the team has in helping to guide leadership decision-making and crafting communications for all stakeholders across the institution.

For this reason, it’s important to consider the Emergency Operations, Crisis Management (Leadership) and Crisis Communications plans holistically with a particular focus on the delineation and coordination of communications roles relative to operational and strategic communications.

**Operational Communications**

Dangerous situations involving an immediate threat to the health or safety of the campus community require clear and immediate notification, including information about a threat or hazard, the actions being taken, and the assistance being provided.

The responsibility for distributing this messaging lies with the police/public safety, and—as the incident progresses—the Emergency Operations Team via the Public Information Officer (PIO) with support from the Crisis Communications Team.

University communications leaders can reduce concern and worry by doing the following:

- Review/Develop existing emergency notifications with police/public safety to ensure emergency messages are in place, appropriate, and clear.
- Ensure it is absolutely clear who has the authority and ability to send emergency notifications.
- Determine what the “single source of institutional truth” will be—ideally a police social media feed that points to an emergency/dark site for more detailed information. All other social media accounts should amplify that messaging and the homepage should direct users there.
- Understand how your emergency site works, who can activate it, and what existing content may already be in place. If none exists, develop a dark site with key areas of information—i.e. class and activity cancellations, resources for mental health support, family assistance, options for campus closure, etc. Ensure the site will be able to support the unprecedented traffic loads that you can expect to see in the first 24-48 hours.
Strategic Communications

By contrast, strategic communications involves values-based messaging designed to convey compassion, reassure the community, and provide updates on administrative actions. Excluding police actions, this vital communication will be the single largest determinant in the perception of the effectiveness of the university’s response.

The crisis communications team has the responsibility for developing a communications strategy and materials, which the institution’s leadership must approve. In discussions with the leadership team:

• Establish and commit to the importance of aligned communications—speaking with one voice as an institution. In the heat of the moment, every leader will want to communicate directly with “1,000 of their closest friends and family,” as one contributor to this paper joked. In seriousness, the importance of ensuring that only fact-based and approved information goes out cannot be overstated.

• Develop an expedited approval process—the single-biggest hurdle to effective communications is following a business-as-usual communications approval process. An expedited approval process should be developed and socialized with administration leaders prior to any crisis event.

• Clarify the role that your president or chancellor will take in media relations.

NEXT STEPS

☐ Arrange a briefing with the school’s Behavioral Threat Assessment Team. Ensure you know how/when the Communications Team will become plugged in.

☐ Meet with other teams to review plans for both operational and strategic communications ensuring that responsibilities and authorities are clearly delineated and supported by all potential responders.

☐ Confirm that communications is represented on the leadership/crisis management team to ensure reputational risk—not just legal, operational or financial considerations—is actively incorporated into decision-making.

☐ Identify and clarify the role of the PIO. Know their reporting lines.

   NOTE: This role may be assigned either to the police—typically in larger institutions—or to the communications team. In either case, there should be a clear understanding of what this role entails, including expectations around specific responsibilities. If this role falls to the communications team, the team will need a clearer understanding of the PIO’s unique requirements, role, and pressures during a crisis and how they can support them. This role should be separate from media relations as the volume of work will be too great for one person to do both.

☐ Develop or update your current Crisis Communication Plan ensuring that it aligns with expectations detailed in the Crisis Management/Leadership and Emergency Operations Plans.
Ensure you have a clear plan for activation of your team including:

- A way to reach all members—core, extended, and backups, day or night. (Ensure that your contact list also includes key members of other teams.)
- A pre-identified meeting location and an understanding of who needs to be onsite and who can join remotely.
- The infrastructure in place necessary to support your approach including access to the plans, tools, and checklists that members will need.

Exercise your team on activation process, roles, responsibilities, communications, and coordination using a realistic scenario and a structure aligned with the maturity of your program. Update your plan as necessary based on the team’s performance.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAMS

One of the most important recommendations shared by schools that have experienced an active shooter is to cultivate and/or build upon relationships with other emergency responders, including campus police/public safety, campus leadership, and other local and regional responders. The goal is to ensure that trusted and collaborative relationships exist prior to any event.

While you may have a theoretical understanding of what each team will do in a response, nothing beats getting to know individuals and the protocols—both written and unwritten—that drive their approach and response. One of the best ways to do this is to have them join your exercises and actively participate in theirs—and when possible, exercise together.
Thank you to the members of the APLU Council on Strategic Communications who contributed to the development of this playbook and to Blue Moon Consulting Group for their expertise and insights in shaping and writing it.