

Be Prepared: A Crisis Communications Roadmap for Law Schools in 2025

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American Law Schools

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Crisis & Litigation Expertise

Our experience includes support in high-stakes matters including:

- Business disruptions
- Criminal & Civil Litigation
- Cyber Attacks
- Executive Termination and C-Suite Shakeups
- Government Investigations & Hearings
- Investigative Reporting
- Industrial Accidents
- Mergers & Acquisitions
- Campus Protests
- Sexual Harassment Incidents
- DEI




Scenario: Public Criticism from a Major Donor

A major donor with significant influence within the law school and the legal community blasts out a series of Tweets on X/Twitter criticizing your institution's DEI curriculum and faculty statements in the school's Law Journal. The posts claim that the school is promoting a "woke agenda" that undermines traditional values and educational standards. The posts are gaining traction, with interactions from alumni, other donors, current students, prospective students, members of the media, and the general public.

You are scheduled to meet with the University leadership team and faculty later today to deliver your response plan and recommendations.



Big Influential Donor 
@BigInfluentialDonor



Disappointed to see my Alma Mater @LawSchool give into the [#wokeagenda](#) with this recent editorial in the Law Journal. I remember when this used to be a real academic institution! Time to get your priorities straight @Dean.

Your School's Law Journal

**How Critical Race Theory Shapes
Modern Legal Education**

Scenario: Gender Discrimination Controversy

A female faculty member at your school just went public with allegations of gender discrimination and sexual harassment against a senior tenured professor. The female faculty member claims the professor made inappropriate comments during meetings and undermined her work in front of colleagues. She claims the behavior has persisted for years and despite reporting it to her superiors, no action was taken by the school.

The faculty member shared her concerns in a formal complaint to the university's Title IX office. The complaint was leaked to the press, and a major news outlet has now published an article detailing the allegations. The story has sparked outrage among students and faculty.

You are expected to provide an update on the school's handling of the situation at a town hall meeting that will be livestreamed virtually for press to attend.



After years of enduring gender discrimination and harassment, I've filed a formal complaint against @YourSchool to hold those in power accountable. Women in academia deserve better. We need transparency, action, and change.

law360

Senior Law Professor Accused of Gender Discrimination and Harassment, Title IX Complaint Sparks Outcry

Real World Crisis Response

Following the October 7th attack and ongoing war in Gaza, college campuses across the country became hubs for protests.

What Not to Do:



Columbia University called in the NYPD to break up an encampment that pro-Palestinian protesters had set up just a day earlier. In doing so, Columbia's leadership threw out the playbook for managing protests that universities have honed for decades to keep students safe. The aggressive intervention by police resulted in students at campuses across the country staging their own encampments in solidarity.




What to Do:



Northwestern University found (relative) success in fostering a dialogue with the protesters that helped to avoid prolonged protests and violence. President Schill released an op-ed in the Chicago Tribune defending his decision and explaining the key principles that drove his decision-making.

First Steps in Pre-Crisis Prep

"By failing to prepare, you are preparing to fail."

-  **Identify Decision Makers:** The first step in preparing for a crisis is identifying the Issue Response Team (IRT) that will be the decision makers – these people will be tasked with managing information flow and decision-making during a crisis. As a group, they must be able to draft, edit, and approve public facing communications and comment on behalf of the school.
-  **Identify Spokespeople:** The IRT should identify a media spokesperson(s) in the event that a more public response is required – such as a press conference or one-on-one interviews – or a name must be attributed to a holding statement. In the event the designated spokesperson is unavailable, there should be two backups that are prepared to take their place. We recommend spokespersons and public-facing executives be media trained in advance to prepare for the pace, level of media scrutiny, and pressure that would surround an incident.
-  **Draft Holding Statements:** It is important to have a pre-prepared response, or holding statement, to quickly address any ongoing crisis while more information is being gathered. This is done through scenario planning on what crises are likely to happen like the examples we just went through. This will help your law school to respond quickly, demonstrate awareness, and maintain control over the narrative in critical early moments.

Creating an Issue Response Team (IRT)



What needs to be decided **IMMEDIATELY** is identifying the team that will be the decision makers when a crisis arises. We call this the Issue Response Team (IRT) – these individuals will be tasked with managing information flow and decision-making during a crisis.



As a group, they must be able to draft, edit, and approve public facing communications and comment on behalf of the school. We also recommend identifying a main spokesperson and secondary spokesperson immediately, so the team is not scrambling when a crisis does occur.



It is important the members of this team understand their roles, are given the authority to respond quickly, and can rapidly approve statements and other actions.

Crisis Best Practices and Guidelines

During a crisis, there are a few truisms and practices to follow, regardless of the specifics of the situation. They include:



Maintain and update contact information for all key decision makers.



Immediately deploy social media and press monitoring to be informed of commentary in real time and be able to respond in kind.



Contact and brief all key decision makers.



Work closely with internal and external legal teams when necessary.



Maintain clear lines of communication before and after the immediate crisis.

Crisis Best Practices and Guidelines



Develop swift, accurate responses to employees/faculty/stakeholders/media:note that the responses will be tailored to each audience.



Review all current and pending paid advertising campaigns and media interviews in the event it needs to be paused to avoid tone-deaf optics.



Make sure you are communicating with your employees, as appropriate, and providing resources/assistance to them.

Guiding principles for a successful response



BE ORGANIZED

Never:

“Law school staff offered differing accounts of what happened...”



BE ACCESSIBLE

Never:

“A law school spokesperson could not be reached for comment ...”



BE TIMELY

Never:

“A law school spokesperson did not respond before deadline...”



BE FACTUAL

Never:

“However, the law school’s statements are contradicted by a video showing how the incident unfolded...”



BE HUMAN

Never:

“While we regret what was said by a faculty member, their conduct was not the reason behind the student’s distress, and the law school is not legally responsible..”



THANK YOU