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## I. Introduction

Crises can happen anywhere, at any time, and often occur when they are least expected. When a crisis does occur, events usually unfold rapidly, leaving little time for planning. That is why advance preparation is essential.

Some crises can be predicted and prevented, and those that cannot be avoided can be minimized if handled properly. Aside from tangible damage, a crisis can also destroy an institution's reputation. The longer a crisis goes on, the more damage it can do to public support, employee and student morale, enrollment and fund raising. Therefore, it is necessary to handle crises in a swift and organized manner.

This plan deals specifically with crisis communication, and coincides with the university's various safety and emergency plans. Some of these other plans include: Residential Life Emergency Plan, Food Services Emergency Plan, Facility Services Emergency Plan, LSU Police Emergency Plan and Recreational Sports Emergency Plan, among others.

The Chancellor of the university and/or the Executive Director of Public Affairs will activate this plan, if necessary, but the entire university community should be aware of the plan and of the roles they play in executing it. If any member of the LSU community believes a crisis is pending or is under way, he/she should report it immediately to the Chancellor, Public Affairs or LSU Police.

This crisis communication plan will offer some possible crisis scenarios and suggestions for handling those scenarios, but will also provide general guidelines for reacting to a crisis. A good crisis communication plan outlines what must be done in times of crisis, but must also be flexible enough to adapt to specific situations as they unfold. The plan must also be periodically tested and evaluated to ensure its effectiveness.

The university will follow these guidelines to respond quickly to handle any crisis or emergency, as well as to inform its publics about the crisis.

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## II. Anticipating a Crisis

Anticipation is the key. University officials should periodically assess crisis risks and know what possible crises are looming. They should anticipate worst-case scenarios of all possible crises, and be prepared for how the media and the public will react to news of a crisis.

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## III. 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:

- **Establish a crisis communication team**  
The team should consist of specific university officials who understand what their duties will be if a crisis occurs. The team should meet annually to ensure that all players are aware of their responsibilities.
- **Have handy all phone, cell and beeper numbers for key officials**  
If a crisis occurs after hours, crisis communication team members and other important university officials will need to be

reached at home or at other locations. These numbers should be compiled BEFORE a crisis strikes, and should be continuously updated.

- **Have local and statewide emergency numbers available**  
Often, a crisis that affects LSU will also affect Baton Rouge and surrounding areas. It is important for the university to maintain contact with parish, city, state and selected federal officials.
- **List possible locations for command/media center**  
Consider where the crisis communication team will meet if a crisis strikes. If media are on campus covering the crisis, the university may wish to offer reporters a work space or a place where they can attend press briefings or receive updates. Obtain letters of permission/access from those who oversee those rooms so that the crisis team can be assured of quick access to those facilities when a crisis strikes.
- **Prepare a Standby Statement**  
The format of a statement can be drawn up and approved in advance. Accurate details can be inserted at the time of the event. This will save time during an actual crisis.
- **Compile a Crisis Kit**  
The crisis kit should contain all of the above items and lists, along with a campus directory, a Baton Rouge phone book, media lists and phone numbers, several legal pads, pens, campus maps, city and state maps, press badges, a list of media addresses, LSU letterhead on CD for press releases, and possibly two-way radios and a laptop computer for writing press releases and updating the LSU Web site from off-campus.
- **Prepare checklists for the university community**  
Students and faculty from out-of-state may not be familiar with some of the usual crises that occur in Louisiana. It would be helpful to provide them with preparation checklists. A hurricane preparedness checklist and an evacuation plan are two such items that could assist the LSU community during a crisis.
- **Communicate this plan in advance**  
This plan should be communicated to the media and to the university community before a crisis strikes. If the media and the university's stakeholders 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 communication process to move more smoothly.
- **Establish A "Code Word"**  
It may be necessary to establish a specific "code word" with the media that could be used to identify official university personnel in case the university needs to be closed. A pre-arranged code word would enable the media to know that a phone call or press release about the university closing is legitimate. This helps protect against false calls to the media.
- **Consider Long-Term Plans for Displaced Students**  
If the crisis leaves students displaced (fire, flood, hurricane, etc.), the university will need a long-term plan for housing them. Will they go to a hotel? Can they be sheltered somewhere on campus?
- **Consider Non-resident Students**  
Some students who do not have cars, and those who are from other states and countries, may not be able to evacuate campus in an emergency. The university must provide shelter for these students or offer them guidance on where to go and how to get there. Can the students be sheltered on campus? In a hotel? Flown home?
- **Identify On-Campus Shelters**  
Depending upon the nature of the crisis, some on-campus buildings could be designated as shelters. For example, the Maravich Assembly Center is used as a medical/special needs shelter during hurricanes, and the Recreational Sports Complex may make a good shelter during certain crises, since it contains restrooms, showers and recreational facilities.
- **Contact Offices Of Telecommunications And Facility Services, At Least Annually**  
Stay in touch with these offices to ensure that university officials know of all possible backup methods of communication and the locations of all generators in case the power goes out.

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## IV. Identifying a Crisis

Different types of crises call for different responses. It is important to identify a crisis while it is still in its early stages. Some may be minor; others severe. The university's response will depend upon the circumstances.

### Types of crises:

- **Sudden—An immediate, unforeseen crisis, with either**
  - a. Massive Lives at Risk/Lost, (examples: hurricane, large fire, flood, riot, chemical spill,) or
  - b. Individual Lives at Risk/Lost (examples: car accident, murder, small fire, meningitis outbreak)

This type of crisis occurs unexpectedly and requires immediate action. If lives are at risk, the first action will be to move swiftly to save lives and prevent injury.

- **Smoldering—An ongoing, festering crisis that begins small and grows larger as more information becomes known.** This type of crisis can drag out and result in bad press for weeks, months or even years. These crises should be resolved as quickly as possible. Officials should try to anticipate future developments and mitigate them. (Examples: An NCAA investigation, sexual harassment lawsuits, closure of the Special Olympic Pool.)
- **Bizarre—An unusual, unexpected crisis that does not fit into the above categories.** (Example: Baton Rouge serial killer. Wasn't really a campus crisis, but certainly affected the LSU community in terms of personal safety and negative media attention.)

\* Some crises may fit into more than one category.

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## V. Handling a Crisis

When crisis strikes, it is essential that the university take immediate action. The key to success is to obtain the information, confirm its accuracy, disseminate the information as quickly as possible and prepare to address the situation as it unfolds. The following steps should be taken as soon as the crisis is identified:

### Action:

- **Gather the facts**  
If a crisis occurs, university officials must immediately gather all available facts. Having accurate information will enable LSU officials to respond to the crisis properly.
- **Convene the crisis communication team**  
The core team members should immediately convene and decide the first course of action. Since this must be done swiftly, the core members should take the lead, and then bring in the rest of the team if the crisis warrants such action.
- **Activate all relevant campus safety plans**  
The crisis communication team members should make sure that all applicable safety plans and safety measures are carried out immediately. Every second counts during a crisis.
- **Take immediate action to ensure the safety of students, faculty, staff and nearby residents**  
If the safety of the LSU community is at risk, immediate action will be taken. This action should be the first decision by the crisis communication team. The activation of campus safety plans should also help ensure the safety of the LSU community.
- **Develop a plan to assist those who have been affected**  
What can LSU do to help those individuals/groups? Grief counseling, mental health services, support groups, memorial services, safety seminars, posters and brochures that offer safety tips, hotline numbers that provide information to family members, etc. These will depend on the nature of the crisis.
- **Designate a command center and/or media center**  
Based on the type of crisis and the university's particular needs, designate a command center and/or media center.
- **Prepare a statement and background information**  
Tailor the standby statement to the events that are unfolding, and prepare background information for the media. In all documents, stick to the facts and don't speculate.
- **Meet with city, state officials, if necessary**  
If the crisis is citywide or statewide, LSU officials and communicators should be in contact with city and state officials. In some cases as with a major hurricane, LSU communicators should report to the State Office of Emergency Preparedness at 7667 Independence Blvd. in Baton Rouge to meet with other state communicators to compare information and make sure LSU is represented in the decision-making process.

### Communication:

- **Identify key audiences**  
Determine which of the university's stakeholders need to be informed of the situation, and in what order:
  1. students, faculty, staff
  2. Board of Supervisors

3. the media
4. parents
5. general public
6. alumni

- **Designate a university spokesperson(s)**

It is best to designate only one spokesperson so the university is providing a unified, consistent message to the public. The Chancellor and/or Executive Director of Public Affairs are the likely spokespersons. The spokesperson must be kept informed of the latest developments, so it is essential that emergency personnel, police, state officials, campus administrators, etc., keep the spokesperson updated.

- **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 a possible evacuation, university officials should inform the public about areas to be evacuated and time lines for the evacuations. The university should also direct the public on where to go for more information—radio, TV, Web sites etc.

- **Activate the crisis hotline number**

The university has a crisis hotline number that can be updated to include a specific message or to take calls from concerned parents and students. The number is 225-578-INFO or 1-800-516-6444. 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.

- **Develop messages**

University officials should develop a few clear, simple messages for its stakeholders and the media. These messages should be delivered repeatedly and clearly and by one voice. 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.

- **Anticipate the tough questions**

The crisis 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.

- **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 stakeholders. For internal audiences, use broadcast e-mail, broadcast voice mail, the LSU homepage and/or security and safety Web site, the telephone emergency hotline and campus media. Always make sure internal audiences are the first to be informed. For external audiences, use the media by holding press briefings or issuing official statements. The first press briefing or statement should come out within five hours of the event or crisis.

- **Identify which mediums are available to communicate your message**

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

- **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 completely truthful and forthcoming. All "bad" news should be told up-front and all at once; otherwise, it will trickle out slowly and the negative media coverage will continue day after day.

- **Control the flow of information**

Public Affairs should control the flow of information by holding a series of press briefings for the media—weekly, daily, or hourly, depending upon 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 Public Affairs employees who work with the media should be briefed on the situation and informed as to what details they can release. Other university employees who answer phones should be informed of where/how to direct media calls. Typically, all media calls should go to the spokesperson or to Public Affairs.

- **Keep track of media calls, requests**

The spokesperson should keep a list of all the reporters to whom he/she talks. This will enable the university to look for news clippings and to later evaluate how the crisis was handled.

- **Respond to the media quickly and fairly**

The media provides a way for the university to get its message to the public. The media will also 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.

- **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 a crisis, check to make sure they don't have Buckley or Directory holds on their personal information. These holds may mean we cannot release their personal information, and in some cases, mean we cannot even acknowledge that they are LSU students. Also, do not release the names of anyone who is injured or killed until their parents/families have been notified.

- Issue joint press releases with city and state officials, if necessary When the crisis is citywide or statewide, stay in contact with city and state officials, and possibly issue joint or complementary press releases with those officials.

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## VI. Factors to Consider

- **Set good policy**  
Setting good university policy is the best way to avoid a crisis and to avoid criticism. No amount of good public relations can make up for bad policy.
- **Do the right thing**  
Being ethical and doing what's right for those involved in a crisis will automatically lead to good public relations. Public relations cannot (and should not) hide things or lie about things.
- **Choose words and phrases carefully**  
Don't unnecessarily panic constituents by being overly dramatic. If possible, use language that will ease the public's concern while still being truthful.
- **Court of law vs. court of public opinion**  
University attorneys and Public Affairs should work together to make sure as much information as possible can be released without jeopardizing any possible investigations or forthcoming litigation.
- **Victim, villain or hero**  
Anyone involved in a crisis can be portrayed by the media as a victim, a villain or a hero. The university can become a hero if it acts responsibly and takes the proper action. Doing "the right thing" is the best public relations strategy. Good public relations cannot help bad policy or poor decision-making.
- **Federal Aid**  
In some cases, particularly if the area has been declared a "disaster area," the university may be able to obtain federal aid. Agencies such as FEMA provide funds to help shelter displaced persons and to repair and rebuild homes and schools, and groups like the American Red Cross provide food and blankets to those who have been evacuated or displaced. These groups can be consulted for more information.

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## VII. Evaluate

Experience is the best teacher. After the crisis is over, it is beneficial to evaluate how the university handled it. Knowing what was done well and what could have been done better will only help refine the crisis communication plan and make it more effective in the future.

- **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.
- **Debrief**  
The crisis communication 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.
- **Test the plan**  
To ensure that the plan works and is kept up-to-date, it should be tested and evaluated annually.

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