

Defining the Board's Role in Crisis Communications

BY PATRICIA HAYES AND TERESA VALERIO PARROT

Having worked together as chair of the Board of Regents and assistant secretary of the University of Colorado during times of public controversy, we are often asked what advice we can share from our work in the trenches.

Fundamentally, we believe boards should work proactively during good times to define what their role should be when times are less good and crisis communication is needed.

As we read daily in our hometown papers, as well as in higher-education media, colleges and universities have a knack for attracting media coverage for less-than-desirable news. Often an overreaction or lack of reaction to a crisis receives more media attention than the situation itself. And board members have a way of finding themselves in starring roles in reporting of the latter situations.

The best-intentioned board member can publicly charge to the rescue of the college, only to find that his or her approach wasn't well received by the media, the public, or other board members. So, what should be the role of a board member in a crisis situation and how can board members prepare?

First, ask that the board receive a briefing from college or university leaders on the institution's "crisis incident plan" and/or "crisis communications plan." The incident plan will outline, for example, how your campus will work to contain a pandemic flu outbreak, coordinate with local authorities on a rape investigation, or investigate and patch a breach of information-technology security. The crisis-communications plan will outline how the institution will proactively communicate what happened to key audiences and what it is doing to address the crisis.

During that board briefing, members should ask:

- What are the current expectations for board members during a crisis?
- How and by whom will the board be notified of a crisis and receive updates?
- What can and should board members do to help the institution?
- As appropriate, who will speak publicly for the board?

- What is the board's legal responsibility and what is a member's personal liability in times of crisis?

Further, brainstorm about what relationships and contacts board members have that can be of assistance during a crisis. For example, what members of the state legislature do board members know and would they be willing to contact during a crisis? What business, foundation, or opinion leaders are board members willing to ask to support the institution publicly? Provide a list to the designated leader of the crisis-communications team so he or she is aware of all the allies board members may be able to rally at a moment's notice.

Board members should know how to respond to press calls. Working with the institution's leaders and aligned with the crisis-communications plan, develop a policy or working document that outlines who can speak on behalf of the board and who will provide the board's voice to the media.

In cases in which it may be beneficial to have a board member speak to the media—for example to express condolences during a tragedy, announce a board decision in a high-profile situation, or announce a presidential hiring or firing—institutions need to designate the board member or members who can best represent them in the court of public opinion. This may or may not be the board chair.

Once these situation-specific roles have been determined, they should be added to the crisis-communications plan and the board policy book. Include board communications guidelines for all members of the board and make sure this topic is covered, at least briefly, in the orientation of new board members.

Spending time in advance of a crisis on policies and procedures for the board's communications role can pay dividends during a crisis. We've learned that an institution's response is often only as strong as its prior planning.

Patricia Hayes is Regent Emerita of the University of Colorado Board of Regents. **Teresa Valerio Parrot**, former assistant secretary of the University of Colorado, is a vice president at Widmeyer Communications.

Spending time in advance of a crisis on policies and procedures for the board's communications role can pay dividends during a crisis.