

Your guide to crisis communication in higher education

A practical guide for marketing and recruitment leaders

By Grace Brennan





Inside:

You'll find everything you need to **navigate a complex crisis in higher education**. It includes actionable tools and steps that will allow you to stay serene and come out the other side, unscathed.

The guide includes everything from essential planning materials to real-life university crisis examples.

- ✔ Be prepared for a future crisis.
- ✔ Protect the organisation and its employees, students/customers.
- ✔ Get back to business as usual, with minimal lasting consequences.

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What is a crisis?

‘A time when a difficult or important decision must be made.’

A crisis impacts your: operations, reputation, finances and people.

A crisis in numbers

Businesses with 5,000+ employees are likely to experience one crisis a year.

What about higher education crises?

In the US, colleges are closing at the rate of approximately one per week, most often due to financial collapse.

How does this ebook help?

With this ebook, you can:

1. Embed the practices and tools in your overarching crisis strategy.
2. Refer back to it whenever you need.

Research highlights that universities have low preparedness in terms of risk and crisis management. At the same time, nearly 70% of global higher education institutions say that reputation management is one of their top challenges during crisis situations.

This ebook helps in both scenarios.

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Who is this guide for?

The ebook is for **university administrators** and **communications and marketing leaders**, who aim to build a solid **crisis management team** and develop a plan to keep your university's staff, students and reputation safe.

The moments when you can turn to this ebook are (but are not limited to):

- Academic and administrative crises
- Health emergencies
- Technology and data breaches
- Environmental disasters
- Student protests/unrest
- Safety and security crises
- Immigration policy changes (affecting international students)

What's your objective?

- To be prepared for a future crisis
- To protect your organisation and its employees, students/customers, and any other stakeholders
- To get back to business as usual, with minimal lasting consequences



‘If you have an organisation of 5,000 or more people you’re likely to experience a public relations crisis every 12 months.’

George Chilton

Creative Managing
Director at
Hubbub Labs



What are the levels of crisis?



Real-world example



1

A serious, but **short-term problem** that affects operations, reputation, finances and people, but does not become news.

In 2024, the University of Arizona implemented a hiring and compensation freeze, and delayed a salary increase for staff. This problem hit Reddit, but the crisis didn't become news.

2

A serious problem that affects operations, reputation, finances and people. The impact is **short to medium** term and becomes local news.

In 2024, University College Cork recorded a €11.2 million deficit and was forced to review its capital projects. It was covered by local news but was not deemed critical.

3

A serious problem that affects operations, reputation, finances and people, and becomes both local and national news. The impact is **medium to long** term.

In 2024, Grand Canyon University was accused of misrepresenting the cost of its doctoral programmes. The crisis attracted national media and led to regulatory action.

4

A serious problem that affects operations, reputation, finances and people, and becomes international news. The impact is severe and has **long-term** damage.

In 2019, several universities including Yale allegedly accepted bribes from parents to guarantee their children's admission. The story was reported in international media, and has had a lasting impact on the school's reputation.





The cost of not being *crisis-ready*

First, let's deal with the elephant in the room:

what's the risk of **not** having a well-briefed crisis communications team and action plan?

\$240
million

University of Arizona lost track of more than \$240 million through accounting errors and flawed financial projections in 2023.



\$1
billion

A sexual abuse scandal cost the University of Southern California over \$1 billion in settlements and legal costs.

\$10.7
million

University of Michigan spent \$10.7 million investigating allegations into a sports doctor, providing counselling to students, and defending 235 lawsuits.

£790
million

UK universities lost £790 million in 2019-20 due to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

-35%

In the United States, 35% of institutions say international applications have decreased for the 2025/2026 academic year in light of new visa policies under the Trump administration.

2-3

A study of private colleges and universities' responses to the 2007-2009 financial crisis found that recovery could take two to three years.





*‘Every little
thing counts
in a crisis’*



Jawaharlal Nehru

First Prime
Minister of India



The case of Columbia University

In 2024, one of the most prestigious universities in the US had a crisis. Initiated by political events, the crisis culminated in the school President, Minouche Shafik, facing a vote of no confidence. **This is what happened.**

18 April



17 April 2024

Pro-Palestine student protests take place on campus. Tensions rise between protesters and university security.

18 April 2024

University President, Minouche Shafik, authorises New York Police Department intervention. More than 100 students are arrested by police in riot gear.

22 April 2024

Shafik publishes [a statement](#) about the events on the Columbia website. She encourages students to 'take a deep breath, show compassion, and work together'.

29 April 2024

Shafik writes [a post](#) underpinning Columbia's four core values and how they relate to the ongoing issues on campus.

30 April 2024

Students occupy Hamilton Hall on campus, Shafik authorises a second NYPD intervention. Around 300 protesters are arrested.

1 May 2024

Shafik shares [another statement](#) noting that the crisis has 'pushed the university to the brink'. She also thanks the NYPD for their support.

2 May 2024

There are calls for a no-confidence vote against President Shafik. The American Association of University Professors releases [a statement](#) condemning the police intervention decision.

11 May 2024

A formal no-confidence vote process begins against Shafik.

16 May 2024

65% of faculty voted no confidence in President Shafik.

14 August 2024

Minouche Shafik shares [an announcement](#) that she is stepping down as President of Columbia University.

30 April



1 May



14 August





Why was the *Columbia crisis* not handled well?

From the outside, it appears that:

- ✘ There was no clear, consistent communication strategy during the unfolding crisis.
- ✘ There was no meaningful engagement with protesters before the situation escalated.
- ✘ There was seemingly no clear protocol for handling campus protests.
- ✘ Decision-making rationale was not communicated to the student population.
- ✘ Shafik's statements were often tone-deaf, not acknowledging the student perspective and the gravity of involving the state police department in university matters.
- ✘ Columbia failed to get control over the situation before it garnered international media attention.
- ✘ Crisis communications did not acknowledge Columbia's long history of student activism.
- ✘ Top-down comms did not take the student voice into account, and so felt out of touch as a result.
- ✘ Trust was lost early on between the institution and students.
- ✘ Trust was later lost between the institution and faculty.



Columbia University president resigns after Gaza protests turmoil

Columbia University President Minouche Shafik has resigned from her position, four months after the institution was rocked by campus protests over the war in Gaza.

Dr Shafik's resignation comes only a year after she took the position at the private Ivy League university in New York City, and just a few weeks before the autumn semester is due to begin.

Dr Shafik is now the third president of an Ivy League university to resign over her handling of Gaza war protests.

In April, Dr Shafik authorised New York Police Department officers to swarm the campus, a controversial decision that led to the arrests of about 100 students who were occupying a university building.

The episode marked the first time that mass arrests had been made on Columbia's campus since Vietnam War protests more than five decades ago.

The move inflamed other protests at dozens of colleges across the United States and Canada.

In an email to students and faculty on Wednesday, Dr Shafik wrote that she has overseen a "period of turmoil" where it has been difficult to overcome divergent views across our community.

"This period has taken a considerable toll on my family, as it has for others in our community."

Katrina Armstrong, chief executive officer of the Columbia University Irving Medical Center, will serve as the interim president.

"Over the summer, I have been able to reflect and have decided that my moving on at this point would best serve Columbia's long-term interests and the students of the University."



Dr Shafik testifies at a House Committee hearing about demonstrations on college campuses in April.

'Vindicated': Columbia University's Gaza protesters react as Shafik resigns

Faculty and student protesters hope for a new approach after the president of the US university steps down — but fear more of the same.



It was an abrupt departure for one of the Ivy League's most embattled leaders: On Wednesday evening, Columbia University President Nemat "Minouche" Shafik announced she would resign, effective immediately.

The news was greeted with relief — and healthy dose of wariness — among student protesters, who believe Shafik's brief tenure at the New York-based university will be defined by her harsh crackdown on anti-war demonstrations.

The departure prompted an array of emotions for 22-year-old Maryam Alwan. Among them, feeling "personally vindicated".

Alwan had been among the students leading the protests last spring, as Israel's war in Gaza caused the Palestinian death toll to surge.

Columbia's students first erected a "Gaza solidarity encampment" on the campus in April, around the same time that Shafik appeared for a controversial anti-Semitism hearing before the United States Congress.

Minouche Shafik

Columbia president Minouche Shafik at centre of campus turmoil

Politicians, faculty and students turn ire on veteran economist amid Gaza war demonstrations

As pro-Palestinian protests roiled its campus and forced a switch to remote learning, Columbia University's board of trustees this week expressed confidence in its president, Minouche Shafik.

But with police drones circling overhead, a censure motion looming in the university's senate and politicians calling for her to quit, the turmoil facing veteran economist Shafik — a former senior figure at the World Bank and Bank of England who has been at Columbia for less than a year — was far from over.

An academic who knew her well in earlier roles said: "Minouche [has been] tremendously successful at engaging the leadership wherever she went. But I can't see how she navigates this and survives."

"It's a Catch-22. The more you appease the rightwing attacks on campus culture, the more you undermine your position with the university."





What were (*some of*) the repercussions?

- **Eighty students** were expelled and some students had their degrees revoked.
- **Four** Columbia staff members were fired.
- In March 2025, the Department of Justice announced the immediate cancellation of approximately **\$400 million** in federal grants and contracts to Columbia University, claiming it was 'due to the school's continued inaction in the face of persistent harassment of Jewish students.' However, there may be an ulterior political agenda behind the fine.
- Columbia University was **criticised** by media, education experts and students (domestic and international) around the world.
- The protests cost **\$150 million** in NYPD overtime.

The long-term *impact*?

For any institution, the long-term impacts of a poorly managed crisis can be:

Reduced student intake

Lost/lower interest from donors

Fewer applications to work at the university

Damaged branding/ association with negative events

🔗 [Read more](#) in our article '*Three higher education crisis communication examples and what universities can learn from them*'.

‘When your institution is under attack, it can be tempting to go into defensive mode. Instead, stay open to criticism and see if there is anything that can be learned.’

Maria Di Mario

Head of Editorial
at Hubbub Labs





Signs things are about to *go wrong*

Although crises seem to arise from nowhere, there are usually indications that things are taking a turn. **Tune your crisis radar into:**



Increases in online negative mentions or hashtags for your university.



Repeated student complaints about recurring issues (especially for specific staff members or activities).



High-profile complaints, i.e. complaints that reach high-level staff or are picked up by media outlets.



Increasing faculty turnover rates.



Jumps in the number of visits to the 'About us' or 'Contact us' pages on your website outside of admissions season.



Reporter(s) showing unusual or sudden interest in your institution.



Donors/investors suddenly withdrawing interest.










Tools to monitor *the signs*

You don't need to rely on manual checks to tell you when a crisis is approaching. Data and analysis tools can let you know when there's a shift in business-as-usual.

We recommend looking into:

Resource	Example
 Social listening tools	Brandwatch, Meltwater, Sproutsocial, Dataminr, YouScan, Talkwater, Hootsuite Insights, Mention
 Web monitoring tools	Google Alerts, Visualping, Onclusive, Remembrapp
 Community manager training	Empower community managers to track complaints and queries carefully; they should make note of, and categorise, recurring issues.
 Student complaint response	Set up a process for student complaints. E.g. receive a complaint, take action, give a response, measure student satisfaction to the response.
 Student comms monitoring	Assign a person in the crisis response team to keep atop of student groups, newspapers and events.



'It's essential your crisis management team works as a unified entity. Any contradictions in statements, actions or messaging will be amplified under the magnifying glass of media attention.'

Maria Di Mario

Head of Editorial
at Hubbub Labs

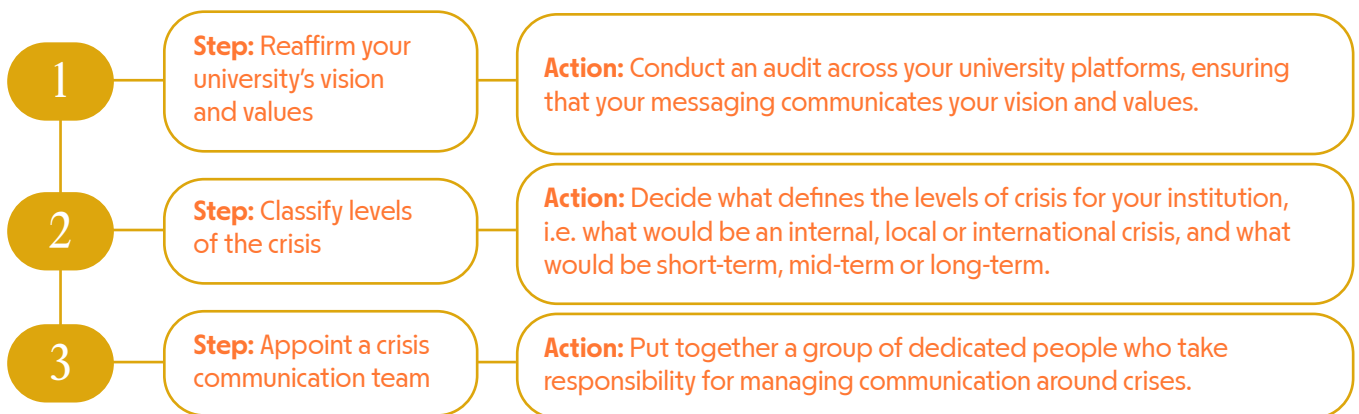




Effective *crisis* handling in action

What do you do to prepare for, respond to, and review a crisis in higher education?
Take a look at the breakdown below.

Before the crisis



During a crisis



After the crisis



 [Read more](#) in our article '*How to build and lead a crisis management team in higher education*'.



*‘In crisis management,
be quick with the facts [and]
slow with the blame.’*

Leonard Saffir

Public relations
executive and
author





Hubbub Labs

toolkit

Access your toolkit for use before, during and after a crisis. **It comprises two key resources:**

1

Press Release template: an outline to write and publish formal media communications in a crisis.

2

Crisis Communications framework: a step-by-step process around preparing, writing, actioning and reviewing internal and external communications in a crisis.

These can help you devise your crisis strategy from day one. Or they can help you develop and improve an existing strategy.

How to use the

Press Release template



The **Press Release template** is a clear guide designed to help you communicate your message and get ahead of any speculation in the press.

Press releases share the bottom line upfront – and are generally informative and formal. They share information about the crisis situation, what the next steps are, and include quotes from stakeholders.

Well-written press releases are more likely to be accepted by publications and be shared more widely for people to read. In a crisis scenario, that means your curated narrative reaches a larger audience faster.

Your **Head of Communications** or **Public Relations Lead** can fill in the relevant information for your institution and crisis, and then share the document with media, journalists and campus publications.





Quick press release *writing tips:*

For higher education institutions experiencing a crisis, your press release should be written with the following in mind:



Transparency:

Acknowledge what has happened



Measured:

Convey stability and control



Empathetic:

Show genuine concern



Proactive:

Demonstrate competence and a plan



Inclusive:

Use language for all types of readers

Avoid using vague language like 'moving forward' or 'at this time'. Be specific and rooted in timely solutions. Also take care not to use minimising language like 'small matter' or 'rare occurrence' – people want to know that you take a crisis seriously.

Before, during and after sending *your press release*

A press release can be a good litmus test for how people are responding to the crisis and what they want from your university in response. After you distribute the press release, do the following:

- 1 Prepare your response to follow-up questions from reporters, staff, students and readers.
- 2 Implement metrics to measure sentiment around the press release (online engagement, in-person surveys).
- 3 Keep open channels with stakeholders (donors, board members, community leaders).
- 4 Create a review process to note learnings from the press release (e.g. if certain terminology was not received well).

Remember that the press release(s) you share – especially early on in the crisis – will be the basis for your communication. Refer back to them for consistency in your messaging and plan of action.









How to use the *Crisis Communications framework*

The  **Crisis Communications framework** breaks down the different stages of managing a crisis. It's a comprehensive guide to all the considerations and steps you should take before, during and after a crisis.

The framework should be a living document that crisis management teams and institution leaders constantly add to, and optimise, based on what's been learned in a crisis.

Each stage of the framework has space for you to add information about your university. For example, in the 'planning' stage, you can specify your purpose and goals. You can also use the definitions of crisis levels in this section to categorise what types of crises you have dealt with in the past, as well as define the scale of a crisis that's unfolding in real time.

Other key aspects of the framework allow you to:

-  *Organise stakeholders according to priority*
to know who should be informed first about what.
-  *Assign crisis management team roles and responsibilities*
to ensure accountability and workflow in a crisis setting.
-  *Define red flags and triggers that signal an impending crisis*
to launch your crisis strategy faster and minimise possible damage.
-  *Put together a debrief to assess each stage and its outcomes*
to update the framework with reliable data and future-proof against other crises.

With the framework, you have a dynamic, chronological timeline that everyone on your crisis management team can access.



‘The most dangerous thing about a crisis is the silence – because that’s where people fill in the gaps with guesswork.’

George Chilton

Creative Managing
Director at
Hubbub Labs



Hubbub services are *a helping hand* in crises

You're not alone in a crisis. In fact, the best crisis management comes from leveraging people with different perspectives and tools. The more diverse your support network is, the more comprehensive and empathetic your crisis response is.

At **Hubbub Labs**, we offer more than the communications framework and PR template – we extend a helping hand to your higher education institution when it needs one most.



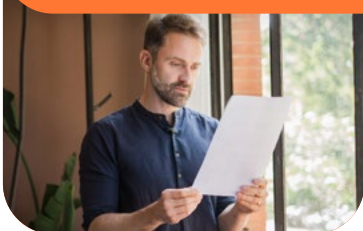
Crisis communication services for teams



Speak clearly. Be heard correctly.

Our comms experts walk your teams through crisis preparation and activation, tailored specifically to your university's needs.

Strategic messaging



Say the right thing, every time.

We work with you to keep all your comms consistent and on-brand with your usual tone and sentiment.

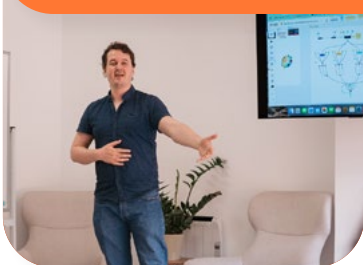
Content creation



Write words that matter.

We draft, edit and update blogs, social media posts, press releases, and any internal or external-facing material in a crisis scenario.

Consulting and workshops



Get great guidance.

Our education thought leaders conduct audits of your comms strategy. We also assist in scaling strategies and run workshops to develop comms strategies in response to current events.

Bespoke support



Services that fit like a glove.

Personalised comms training and content creation services according to your preferences and objectives.



Learn more about Hubbub Labs services.

Get in touch.

