

A Crisis Plan Critique: *Millersville University Athletics*

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Abstract

This paper discusses the rising relevance of Crisis and Emergency Communications Plans in athletics and critiques the Emergency Action Plan for the Millersville University Athletics department. As pointed out within the critique; athletic teams, clubs, and organizations have to take steps to prepare for athletic injury, a weather-related emergency, and any man-made emergencies that may arise. While the plan may be tied in closely with the overall crisis plan of the governing University, it should include its own emergency plans in addition to basic communication channels, chains of command, and media/social communication outlines. This critique explores background, potential needs, strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions to potentially strengthen the plan. It includes interviews with staff members of the University Athletics Department to add dimension to the plan and give a look into the roles of those involved.

Introduction

Crisis and Emergency Action and Communication plans have taken on a newfound importance in the sports industry as an increasing amount of crises, both internal and external, occur at games and within organizations. Athletic teams, clubs, and organizations have to take steps to prepare for athletic injury, a weather-related emergency, and any man-made emergencies that may arise. While the plan may be tied in closely with the overall crisis plan of the governing University, it should include its own emergency plans in addition to basic communication channels, chains of command, and media/social communication outlines.

College Sports Information Directors of America (CoSIDA) conducted a survey in

2012 that targeted collegiate sports information and athletic communications. There were 152 responses, all from CoSIDA athletic communicators and new media associates. According to the survey, “The majority of respondents with a crisis plan include elements for media relations (80 percent), text message alerts (61 percent), emergency email notification plan (64 percent), plans for campus electronic signage (29 percent), predetermined messaging or talking points (27 percent), and a prepared dark website (17 percent) to be implemented in the event of an emergency. Even though close to 100% of respondents have official social media channels, almost 60 percent have no plan to monitor those channels in a crisis,” (Syme, 2012).

Background

Millersville University is an NCAA Division II and PSAC member university located in Millersville, Pennsylvania. It has a total of 19 athletic teams: 7 men's and 12 women's. The public University has nearly 8,000 undergraduates and close to 9,000 total students with approximately 2,200 living on campus (Cobo, 2019).

The plan is updated alongside the University's overall crisis plan once per year; "everyone at the University that has a role - from janitors and groundskeepers to decision makers like the President and Vice President- are a part of the crisis communication team," (E. Hulsey, personal communication, Nov. 25, 2019). The major change between the 2018-19 and 2019-20 plans were the removal of and addition of athletic trainers and other staff. The plan itself is relatively new; "going back 3 years ago we did not have a comprehensive EAP plan and were not doing annual training. We worked very hard to make something comprehensive..." (M. Gallagher, personal communication, Nov. 27, 2019).

There are a multitude of game and practice facilities on campus to account for in the making of a crisis plan. Facilities on campus include "the Athletic Training Room, Pucillo Gymnasium, Seaber Softball Stadium, Soccer Fields, Pucillo Extra Field, Cooper Park (Baseball field), Biemesderfer Stadium, Carpenter-Trout Weight Facility, or any other playing or conditioning area on the Millersville University Campus used by the Intercollegiate Athletic Program," (Millersville University Athletics, 2018). Teams practice, exercise, and compete regularly in all facilities listed as well as travel to and compete at other universities. The University's home athletic games and

matches receive moderate attendance by students, community members, and occasionally members of athletic teams from the opponent's university.

Millersville Athletics also has stakeholders in the form of sponsors including RISE, Mulà architects, Murray Insurance, Signarama, Benchmark construction, Student Services Inc., Gamber physical therapy and fitness, UPMC Pinnacle, Iron Valley Real Estate, ESCO Security, and Fulton Bank.

More common crises that this athletics organization would face is an inclement weather emergency or a severe athletic injury. More uncommon emergencies would include threats of violence or an active shooter situation. All of these are most likely to occur during a game or contest, but may also occur during team travel, practices, or conditioning.

Conclusion of Initial Plan Analysis

The Millersville University Athletics' plan focuses nearly entirely on the 'initial phase' of a crisis. The 'initial phase' is "characterized by confusion, uncertainty, and intense media interest," (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services). It does not explore in depth or lay out content pertaining to the pre-crisis, maintenance, resolution, and evaluation phases. However, there is pre-crisis preparedness through the creation and timely updating of the plan. The recommendations to strengthen the plans that are made focus on aspects of the other stages of crisis as found and defined in the chapter titled "Psychology of a Crisis and Principles of Risk Communication" within the *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Manual* (2014).

References

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- Ulmer, R. R., Sellnow, T. L., & Seeger, M. W. (2019). *Effective crisis communication moving from crisis to opportunity*. Los Angeles: SAGE.
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Appendix

Overall Plan Rubric

Aspects of Plan	Rating (Needs Improvement 1 - 7 Best)	Comments
Contact Information <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Inter-department</i> • <i>Campus police, etc.</i> • <i>Local community</i> • <i>Local media</i> 	5/7	The plan includes a complete contact list for inter-department and campus contacts. It did not include local community contacts or media outlets.
Planning for Initial Crisis Phase <i>“During this stage of acute danger, the priority for all is basic safety and survival,” (U.S., 2014).</i>	6/7	This plan effectively lays out proper response plans in the event of athletic injury or health emergency, inclement weather, or an active shooter situation. It also gives the correct amount of information about each facility and the location of essential emergency equipment. However, aside from basic initial scripts and communication with EMS there are no guidelines for in-crisis communication.
Essential Communication to Audiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Identification of Audiences</i> • <i>Identification of spokespeople</i> • <i>Immediate communication script to those involved in incident</i> • <i>List of unreleasable topics/information without approval</i> • <i>Script Message Templates</i> 	2/7	The plan includes scripts for the media department to announce during games if necessary in the event of inclement weather or an active shooter. The plan does not include Athletic Department specific audiences, scripts, and unreleasable information.
Crisis Communication Center or two-way communication channel <i>“The centers receive requests for information from each audience and disseminate information to each</i>	1/7	The plan included communication instructions to communicate or report when a crisis occurs. However the plan does not lay out any communication plans for the

<i>audience...The “contact center” fields inquiries from [stakeholders, media, etc.]” (Dept. of Homeland Security).</i>		phases of a crisis past the ‘Initial phase.’
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Rubric created based off of information within the following sources:

Department of Homeland Security. (n.d.). Crisis Communications Plan. Retrieved November 24, 2019, from <https://www.ready.gov/business/implementation/crisis>.

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, & Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2014). *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (Manual)* (Second Edition).

Overview of suggested add-ins to plan

- Local government and media contact information
- Emergency teams of each individual team OR list of who holds which team’s plan
- Established communication guidelines (post initial crisis phase)
- Basic plan for a social media response

Sample Pages Provided

- Local Government and Media Contact Information
- Emergency Teams by Sport

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