

CRISIS MANAGEMENT: MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

THE CHALLENGE



Montclair State University (MSU) is the second-largest university in New Jersey, serving over 23,000 students. The campus rivals the size of many New Jersey municipalities, encompassing 252 acres of land and overlapping two major counties and four towns. Like any large institution, the university was vulnerable to numerous reputational, political, labor, security and safety crises. However, while other state universities and government agencies leverage comprehensive crisis plans, MSU lacked a centralized, systemic approach to potential crises. This left the university's story and reputation at risk of being dictated by spur-of-the-moment crises and unmanaged negative media coverage on several fronts.

The TASC Group was retained to complete an evaluation, audit and report of MSU's crisis communications infrastructure, as well as develop a comprehensive strategic game plan and roadmap for the university to use moving forward.

THE STRATEGY



TASC completed a rigorous audit of MSU's existing emergency response plan. TASC reviewed the university's existing strategies, interviewing over a dozen senior leaders, executive council members and members of the MSU communications team. TASC also evaluated recent and past crisis communications incidents on campus to measure the university's existing capabilities and competencies.

After an audit of MSU's existing communications infrastructure, TASC made extensive recommendations that included protocols for the formation of a crisis communications committee, prudent handling of media requests, when and how to send campus-wide alerts, press conferences and statements and the creation of contingency chains of command. To this end, TASC selected and media-trained university spokespeople and polished MSU statements to the media. TASC also elevated positive stories about the impact MSU was making in the education space and created a media contact list of notable reporters and outlets covering MSU across New Jersey and New York.

THE RESULTS



The TASC Group's priority was to streamline and battle-test a comprehensive crisis response playbook, establishing clear protocols and exercising various scenarios to help the university move from its mostly ad hoc crisis approach to a more structured and proactive approach. After implementing the recommendations and processes laid out by TASC, future crises that MSU encountered were managed effectively by the university's leadership and communications teams.

Having a simplified plan of action allowed the institution to coordinate crisis responses and succinctly manage crises from natural disasters to faculty disputes. TASC's work enabled the university to better minimize and mitigate damage and restore trust among its many students, faculty, staff and stakeholders. MSU was also able to rebuild relationships in the media, creating opportunities for more positive coverage of the university's strides in the education space and allowing them to control their own institutional storytelling.

