

Campus Crises Don't Need More Heroes. They Need NIMS

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NIMS does not stand for “No Idea, Make Something...up.” I’m sure some college leaders have privately assumed it stood for “Now It’s My Situation” or “Nobody Is Making Sense.” NIMS stands for the National Incident Management System. It was created because emergency response in the U.S. had some spectacular crisis-management failures.

After 9/11, the federal government saw gaping holes in our collective response and sanctioned the creation of NIMS in 2003. But it wasn’t actually “new!” It was a rebranding of a concept developed in the 70s called FIRESCOPE. Originally, FIRESCOPE helped responders from different jurisdictions coordinate efficiently during massive wildfires. Outside of fire response, it was rarely used, though urgently needed.

Fast forward 30 years: the poorly coordinated response during 9/11 finally forced the realization that a unified standard for all types of disaster coordination was needed. Sadly, other tragedies like Hurricane Katrina played a large role in sculpting NIMS into the system it is today. We learn from our mistakes, right? The system continued to evolve from its original form, consistently proving its effectiveness. By 2006, the nation saw hospitals, healthcare providers, utility companies, retailers, and even Disney adopt the NIMS model despite the fact NIMS was originally built for the government. It worked better than existing emergency structures, and it spread like wildfire. 😊

So, what about higher education? Action was slower, but there were some trailblazers. Kent State University developed a comprehensive emergency management plan in the 70s. In the late 90s, UC Berkeley had an emergency operations center established in the basement of Barrows Hall. But most of higher education really started taking emergency management seriously after the Virginia Tech shooting. During that era, grants from the Department of Education, FEMA, and various higher-ed associations helped push emergency management measures forward. While the University of Wisconsin system was active with EOC activation policies by 2010, many private universities and colleges in the state lagged. Another standout trailblazer has been Milwaukee Area Technical College, which jumped on board early to develop a campus-based, all-hazards emergency plan in 2010. Even making it into a *Campus Safety* publication for their efforts. Go MATC!

So, why do we care? Because emergencies aren’t disappearing from our campus communities. Whether it’s a cyberattack, a roof collapse, a protest, a tornado warning, or the next “no one saw it coming” crisis, the question isn’t *if* a campus will face a crisis; it’s whether they are prepared.

Preparation is what makes the difference when seconds matter. Without NIMS, everyone

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speaks a different language. Roles blur, information gets passed around like a game of telephone. Resources are duplicated, and precious time is wasted determining individual roles instead of actually solving the problem.

Flip the script: when colleges use NIMS, everyone from local police and fire departments to the college president already knows the playbook. Outside responders know exactly who to contact on campus. Campus departments understand their roles. Information flows where it needs to go, decisions happen faster, and resources don't clash. Less chaos means getting back to the mission, safer and sooner.

Here's the interesting part: NIMS wasn't designed to stay frozen in the early 2000s, unlike my AOL email account. The structure is stable, but it's inherently flexible. If we believe technology improves every other aspect of life, why wouldn't we expect AI and tech to transform our response? Virtual EOCs, integrated technology for monitoring crises such as severe weather, and after-action reports with AI analysis to sharpen the next response continue to be reviewed.

The good news? Emergency responses are becoming easier by allowing us to spend more time on operations and less time manually typing timelines. If you are not familiar with NIMS, check out this [LINK to NIMS](#) to learn more. NIMS recommended practices save time, minimize panic, and, when seconds count, make a massive impact.