

Misinformation: The Biggest Disaster

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In August of 2023, North Carolina's Chapel Hill experienced a heart-wrenching incident where a student fatally shot an instructor and fled the campus. An initial message was sent out to students and staff stating that they were in a lockdown and "an armed and dangerous person on or near campus." The campus remained in lockdown for 3 hours while police located the individual off campus and confirmed it was the person of interest in the tragedy.

During a lockdown situation, what do you imagine happens as people wait for hours? In this incident, initially, students reported on social media that they locked doors, turned off lights and moved away from windows. They followed the protocols. After such a long wait time, people began trying to find out more information. Based on student reports, they started scrolling X, Instagram, Snapchat, and TikTok looking for anything else as the messaging was so vague and the wait was so long. One person posted on social media that there was a rumor of two shooters on campus. This spread rapidly and raised the level of fear amongst the university community. Students posted real-time photos and videos of their lockdown conditions and did check-ins with each other to verify if their friends and classmates were safe. There was even a video of someone hiding, showing the police sweeping the building. The rapidly spreading unverified information outpaced the attempts of University groups to update the community.

Misinformation is a real risk, and there are ways to mitigate the tunnel vision of non-campus communication. Best practices include cross-posting campus communications to include the mediums used by students, such as multiple social media platforms. Frequent updates are a must, even if there are no updates to give; leaving one message with no updates makes it look like the campus is not sharing relevant information. During major crises, straightforward messaging is best. Too much information can also be misconstrued. Some of the colleges are using a website that takes over during an emergency, it provides the primary campus contact number, campus updates, and blocks other non-essential information. The reason is to keep people from reaching out to other sources across campus, looking for info outside of the actual true source of information.

The Wisconsin Technical Colleges are working continuously to improve their emergency response and practice emergency management through tabletops and exercises. The colleges also improve their emergency response by learning from incidents at other higher education institutions, like the Chapel Hill incident mentioned above. The colleges will be practicing their communications plans over the next year and continue to work on clear messaging, updating frequently, and cross-posting the information for all to see in the campus community. Together, we can build a safer, more informed campus environment.

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