

SCENARIO 1: Communicating about difficult budgetary decisions

You are the dean of a law school undergoing deep budget cuts based, in part, on decreased enrollment for the university and your school. In addition, during your tenure the average dollar amount and total number of donations to the school is down. The budget reductions will require you to cut (both through attrition and reductions in force) positions that amount to 10 percent of your budget for salary and benefits. Rumors are rampant about which faculty and staff will be impacted.

With input from your senior staff, you decide to err on the side of transparency by holding a meeting for all faculty and staff. You intend to set out a summary of the law school's budget, the required reductions, and the process you will use to determine which positions to cut. At the meeting, your presentation is peppered with questions and comments from faculty and staff, ranging from suggestions ("Instead of cutting our jobs, why don't you cut what we spend on travel and events?") to emotional reactions ("I've been a staff member for over 20 years, and I'm worried you'll cut my job before you cut a tenure-track faculty member who hasn't even been here for a year!") to calls for resignations ("Who's responsible and should be fired—you, our fundraisers or those in admissions who can't fill our class?"). As you try to respond, you notice that a reporter from your local paper is standing in the back.

1. How would you handle the remainder of the meeting?
2. Is there anything you need to do or anyone you need to follow up with after the meeting?
3. How would you handle the negative front-page article that appears the following day with the headline, "Law School Faculty and Staff Angry Over Dean's Budget Cuts: Fiscal and Enrollment Hemorrhaging Signal Significant Layoffs"?
4. In hindsight, would you have handled internal communication differently? If so, what would you have done differently?

SCENARIO 2: Communicating about cancelling an event

You are the law school dean. A law school student group invited a militant activist and scholar to speak on campus. Knowing there was potential for controversy, the student group followed all campus protocols for speaker requests. After the event was scheduled and announced, you, the university president, and several members of the law faculty received death threats via email. In addition, a comment appeared on the law school's Facebook page threatening a mass shooting at event should it proceed.

University security and counsel's office are involved. The State Police have deemed the threats credible, and advised the university to cancel the event. The governor has weighed in by condemning the event and noting this is another example of "a campus running amok." A group of supporters of the speaker, including paid protesters, have threatened to create a campus riot should the event be cancelled. The student group, composed exclusively of law students, is threatening to sue the school if the event is cancelled. On Twitter, a group of counter-protesters is threatening further protests and violence.

Legal counsel recommends the president cancel the event. The president, knowing he has a political hot potato, sidesteps the decision by allowing you to determine if the event will go on.

1. What do you do?
2. How do you communicate the decision? To whom? Who does the communicating? Who is the spokesperson for media requests?
3. Does the content of the communication differ depending on audience? What factors affect how you communicate the decision?

SCENARIO 3: Communicating on social media

You are the dean of Blackacre Law School. You are a week away from the decision date for incoming law students and you know that your deposit numbers are down and your class profile is lower than last year. Your law school communications director comes to you with what she describes as a “PR nightmare.” There are several law students on Twitter who are detailing their grievances and using the hashtag #BlackacreLawSucks. These grievances run the gamut from financial aid problems, to complaints about professors, to low bar passage and job placement rates. The quality of the school’s facilities is called into question and students begin to post pictures of deferred maintenance eyesores while simultaneously asking where the money associated with increased tuition is going. There are several tweets about the handling of a recent Title IX investigation. The tweets and responses seem to be growing by the hour and the conversation has moved over to Facebook, including into the group set up for incoming students. Some of the tweets are directed at you by including your Twitter handle. The local higher education reporter has started interacting with some of those tweeting.

1. Do you address these student complaints? If so, what method do you choose to communicate with the students?
2. Do you inform university communications or the provost about the problem? What additional information would you want prior to making this decision?
3. What, if anything, do you communicate to deposited or accepted students?
4. Do you engage the reporter?