



# **WORKING WITH THE NEWS MEDIA**

A DIFFERENT KIND OF ADVOCACY



## Introduction

You don't have to be a communications professional to work effectively with the news media, whether to talk about the work you do, share stories about your campus, or to express your views about a public policy issue that is important to you. As an expert practitioner and member of the community, you offer an important and valued point of view.

## Why Talk to the News Media?

Advocacy groups and activists need to actively engage the news media in order to generate public dialogue and action. This is because:

- The media are important drivers of public opinion.
- Decision-makers pay attention to the news media in choosing their priorities and deciding their votes. Local news matters. As a constituent, so does your voice.
- Others are speaking out. We need to contribute to the debate and ensure that an informed and balanced voice is included.

This handbook provides basic information about how to work effectively with the news media. It can help you to prepare for when the spotlight shines on your office or on issues you care about. The first three sections provide general guidelines and tips for interacting with the news media. In Section Two, **Working with the news media: Beginning with the basics**, a new overview of engaging with journalists online has been added to help you get your message out through the use of the Internet. The fourth section, **Tools of the Trade**, gets down to the specifics of preparing a news release, writing an op-ed piece, and other media relations activities.

*Note:* This handbook is not meant to be a substitute for the expertise of communications professionals at your institution or organization. It is intended to provide basic information and tips about working with the news media for individuals whose primary work does not typically include media relations.

Feedback about this handbook is encouraged and should be directed to Ursula Oaks, Director, Media Relations, NAFSA, at [govrel@nafsa.org](mailto:govrel@nafsa.org)

NAFSA: Association of International Educators, Washington, DC

© 2004, 2007, 2010 by NAFSA: Association of International Educators, except where otherwise noted. All rights reserved.

# Contents

I.	Before You Get Started . . . . .	3
II.	Working with the News Media: Beginning with the Basics . . . . .	4
III.	Engaging the News Media: Essential Communication Strategies . . . . .	6
IV.	Tools of the Trade . . . . .	8
	Basic Communication Options	
	Writing a Good News Release	
	Better Interviews	
	Op-Eds	
	Letters to the Editor	
	Meeting with the Editorial Board	
	Should We Hold a Press Conference?	
	Media Relations During a Crisis	
	Tracking Your Media Relations Activities	
V.	Pitching a Story, or Catching up with One . . . . .	18
VI.	Appendix . . . . .	19
	Sample News Release	
	Sample Media Advisory	
	Sample Letter to the Editor	

## I. Before You Get Started

A number of the sections in this handbook assume that you are in a position—or are expected, as part of your job—to speak with the news media, at least occasionally, on international education topics in your areas of expertise. Anyone can help advance issues they care about – advocate – through the news media, whether as a private member of the community or as a representative of an institution or other group, but it is important to work in cooperation with the formal structures that are in place at your institution and to clearly define your media relations role.

**Know the policies of your institution or organization regarding contact with the news media.** Institutions vary widely in their policies regarding employees' contact with the media. If you haven't already done so, you should speak with your supervisor and communications office to ensure that you understand the relevant policies and requirements before you reach out to the press.

Your institution may require that you work with your communications office instead of making direct contact with reporters. This is not a problem. Your communications staff is a good professional resource, maintaining local media contact lists and offering a media-savvy staff. Working with that office does not mean that you should rely on them to do all the leg work, however. Be proactive, and let them know that you are a willing and qualified source they can call on if they get a media inquiry that relates to your work. Cultivating this relationship, you can increase the visibility of programs and issues that are important to you, by providing story ideas to pitch, information about campus happenings, and more. It will be important for you to stay in close contact with the communications office staff, to be certain that your releases and story ideas get out to reporters and that they get timely follow-up.

**Know the parameters of your role.** Defining your role clearly from the beginning will give you a greater degree of comfort in the media relations activities you undertake and will help reporters understand the boundaries of your interactions with them. Before you pick up the phone or begin to communicate with reporters, ask yourself these questions: For whom am I speaking? My institution? My program? Myself as a member of the community? Which issues or topics am I comfortable speaking about? Am I prepared to handle unexpected questions?

## II.

# Working with the News Media: Beginning with the Basics

Before getting into the how-to details of media relations, it is a good idea to review a few fundamentals for relating to and working with the news media.

**Stay informed.** Knowing the latest—or at least knowing where to find information quickly when you need it—will help you to be a good resource for reporters. Take the time to follow important national issues in the field, as well as the related issues and trends on your campus. ➔ Consult the NAFSA Web site and online press room ([www.nafsa.org/press](http://www.nafsa.org/press)), and NAFSA’s regular publications, for information about international education advocacy efforts.

**Follow the news.** Try to keep up with the local and regional coverage from a variety of news outlets. This could mean following local and national newspapers, trade publications, and also blogs and other online news sources that address your subject area. Read letters to the editor, editorials, and opinion pages to learn which issues are capturing the attention of your community. You may want to follow online conversations on sites like Facebook and Twitter to gauge reaction to your issues and be proactive in your media outreach. ➔ *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed* are good resources to keep up with on an ongoing basis.

**Get to know local reporters.** Keep an eye on which reporters cover what, and follow local stories to see which issues get frequent coverage. Consider how your issue could piggy-back onto another hot topic. Maintain a simple list of reporters who may be interested in international education stories (usually those covering the education, immigration, foreign policy, or national beat). Your list should include the reporter’s name, news outlet, contact information, beat, and if you know it, their preferred method of contact. Include local and regional newspaper, radio, and television contacts, and don’t forget the campus, weekly, and community press. Many reporters are now using Twitter, and this is a good way to keep up with their interests and coverage. ➔ NAFSA’s Take Action site (<http://www.nafsa.org/takeaction>) includes a “Guide to the Media” with listings of news outlets across the country and a tool you can use to communicate directly with editors and reporters.

**Be helpful to build relationships.** One of the best ways to build relationships with reporters is to simply be helpful to them. Take advantage of appropriate opportunities to send helpful materials or information to reporters – or ask your communications office to do so – even when you don’t have a story of your own to pitch. For example, if a new report is released with interesting data a reporter might be able to use, send them a copy or a link to the report online, and explain how it is relevant to local trends or issues. ➔ Keep a simple log of your outreach efforts, including the reporter’s name, outlet, contact information, beat, and the date and purpose of your communication.

**Be there when they need you.** Reporters need credible, reliable, and responsive sources. If you cannot be these three things, they will not come back again. Be sensitive to deadlines. Respond quickly and as helpfully as possible when a reporter calls.

**Don't be intimidated.** You should always ask yourself if the reason you are contacting reporters is newsworthy and likely to be of interest to them, but at the same time, don't be intimidated by the idea of contacting the media. Reporters and editors expect and need calls from the public in order to make sure they are covering the stories and issues that are important to the community. They will consider the information they get from you and then decide whether or not to pursue it further. That decision may be affected by factors that have nothing to do with how interesting your story is, such as other breaking news, deadlines, availability of a reporter to cover the story, and many other issues. All you can do is plant the idea; the rest is up to them.


**Be patient.** Building relationships with reporters takes time. It could be a while before your outreach generates any response. Although this may be frustrating, your efforts are still important. Each time you contact a reporter with good information or an interesting story idea, you are taking a step toward establishing yourself as a reliable and helpful source. Developing this type of long-term relationship with your local news outlets is very valuable and will help you in working successfully with them in the future.

### III.

## Engaging the News Media: Essential Communication Strategies

Three golden rules apply to any contact with the news media: **Tell the truth. Talk about what you know. Timing is everything.**

When you have a story to tell or an event to promote, the window of opportunity for capturing a reporter's interest can be very small, and good communication strategies are essential. Here are a few to keep in mind.

 **Tell the truth. Talk about what you know. Timing is everything.**


**Know the local angle.** At community and local news outlets, every potential story must pass this test: Is there a compelling local angle? Before you approach a reporter, ask yourself how your story or issue impacts your community. It's important to take off your "NAFSA hat" and consider why the average person would be interested in your story. The better job you do articulating how your issue is relevant to the local community, the better chance you have that a reporter will be interested.

**Identify the right target.** Whenever possible, talk to a specific editor or reporter, and direct email messages to a specific person. When calling, ask for the reporter who handles higher education, national or political news, or your institution's activities.

➡ When sending a release or advisory, call the newsroom first to identify the proper recipient for your news if you are unsure. Sending your materials to the "news desk" is sometimes necessary but lessens the chance that someone will pay attention to them. Do not assume they will be forwarded to the right person. When in doubt, check online or in a published media directory, or contact your communications office.

**Get to the point quickly.** Like you, reporters and editors are very busy. Identify your main point before you make contact, and make your point (and explain the local angle) up front: the first couple of sentences of a written communication or phone call.

**Be sensitive to deadlines.** Respond to inquiries promptly, even if only to reassure the reporter that you received their message and that you are working on the request. ➡ When calling, it is usually best to contact newsrooms between 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. This avoids morning meetings and afternoon deadlines. Begin calls by saying: "Is this an okay time to talk for a minute or two?" If the reporter seems impatient, offer to call back at another time. Your chances of success will be much greater if you catch them when they can focus on your call. Many reporters prefer to receive email messages first, so that they can address them when they have time.

**Focus your message, and stay on it.** Whether you are making proactive contact or responding to an inquiry, identify the message you want to convey about the topic at hand, and find ways to make your point. It is important to answer the reporter's questions if you can, but that does not mean waiting to be asked the "right" question. ( **Better Interviews** in the next section for more details.)

**Don't speak before you are ready.** Get resource materials in front of you, review your main messages, and be sure you have the latest information before doing any interview. Don't let a hurried reporter push you into speaking before you are ready. Good reporters will respect your request for a little time.

**Use the momentum.** When you have a media success or your issue is in the news, use the momentum to keep the dialogue going. Consider a letter to the editor to comment on a story, or submit an op-ed (📧 **Tools of the Trade** section for how-to advice). Give positive feedback on a good story, or offer further resources in case they are interested in covering the issue again in the future. ➡ Send good articles to your institution's leadership or your congressional delegation, as appropriate. Use NAFSA's Take Action site to learn more about how to communicate effectively with members of Congress:

<http://www.nafsa.org/takeaction>

**Engage Online.** Social media tools – blogs, Twitter feeds, social networking sites like Facebook or MySpace, video sharing sites, wikis and more – make it possible for anyone with an Internet connection to instantly share information and have a conversation online about the issues they care about. Reporters from the traditional news media are quickly becoming a large part of these conversations, and an entirely new cadre of online news aggregators and bloggers has also emerged. Connecting with them through these channels will increase the reach of your message.

➡ A growing number of influential and high-quality blogs are making their mark on the understanding of important issues of public concern. In much the same way that you might communicate with print and broadcast journalists, connecting with bloggers is really about building relationships. What they want is reliable information, offered to them in a straightforward and engaging manner. Bloggers don't like press releases – a simple, personal email message is best. The good news is, because their media space is online, bloggers will often pick up stories that newspapers can't find room for. For the most part, though, the rules of engagement with bloggers and mainstream reporters are the same: Be helpful. Be honest. Be responsive. To get started, begin regularly reading a handful of blogs on topics that are of interest to you.

**Correct mistakes.** Do this firmly but politely. Good reporters will want to know if they made an error. If you are misquoted, contact the reporter directly to discuss it. If the article is not balanced or contains serious inaccuracies that the reporter does not acknowledge, a letter to the editor may be appropriate (📧 **Letters to the Editor** in the next section for more details).

## IV. Tools of the Trade

### Basic Communication Options

**Email.** Email is usually the best way to communicate with reporters, and certainly the way most of them prefer to hear from sources. Email gives reporters more space to prioritize and organize pitches and information. Keep in mind, though, that many reporters are overwhelmed by email; they may disregard messages from people they do not know, and most of them do not feel an obligation to respond to email messages unless they have a question or want to schedule an interview. Sometimes follow-up by phone is necessary. ➔ Avoid sending email to generic mailboxes like [newsroom@cnn.com](mailto:newsroom@cnn.com). Look up the outlet online, or call the newsroom and get the name of a person. When you are sending additional materials, include them in the body of your message whenever possible. Many newsrooms have spam filters and firewalls that block certain types of messages, especially those with attachments.

**Telephone.** The most direct way to make contact with a reporter is by telephone. However, the telephone can also be the most challenging way to communicate with them. Calling requires you to think on your feet and get your message out quickly. There are rarely second chances when you pitch a story to a reporter by phone. ➔ In all cases, avoid calling close to deadlines and always ask if the reporter has a minute or two to talk. And try to resist calling just to ask: “Did you get my email message?” Be ready with something else to add to the exchange.

**Fax.** Faxing is a distant second to email for a written communication, but news outlets do accept faxes. However, they are prone to getting lost in busy newsrooms, so it is important to direct your fax to a specific person whenever possible.

**Mail.** Don’t overlook traditional mail as a good way to keep reporters informed about relevant reports, studies, and other less time-sensitive information.

### Writing a Good News Release

News releases can be used to announce a new program or publication, report new findings, or make a statement about an issue of public concern.

- ✓ All good news releases start with a headline that captures the news in an informative and interesting way.
- ✓ A news release should always include a contact name, phone number, and the date at the top.

The first sentence of a release should clearly state the most important point you want to convey. State the issue and the local connection. The most important information and the “conclusion” (the main point) should be in the first paragraph, with the less essential information following.

- ✓ The second paragraph should provide essential background for the most important point. The release should concisely answer the 5 “W’s”: who, what, when, where, and why. A short quote or anecdote strengthens a release and gives the reporter a possible hook for a story. Avoid canned-sounding quotes like “We are so thrilled to announce...” The quote should add information and interest.
- ✓ Save general information about your program or office for the last paragraph, and don’t include unrelated information. Focus the release on the news you have to convey.
- ✓ If you are sending the release electronically by email, include Web links to relevant information within the body of the release.
- ✓ In almost all cases, a news release should be no longer than one page.
- ✓ Timing: It is best to send news releases during the early part of the day. Avoid releasing news on a Friday, unless it is breaking news.
- ✓ If the goal of your communication is to announce an event that will be taking place, send a *media advisory* instead, which only states the event details and how to get more information.

 **Sample News Release** and **Sample Media Advisory** in the **Appendix**

## Better Interviews

What follows are basic interview tips and guidelines. Each interview situation is unique and may require tailored preparation. Practicing basic answers to frequently asked questions and keeping a briefing book of common interview topics handy can help.

Don’t let a hurried reporter pressure you into doing an interview before you are ready. If a reporter launches right into interview questions and you feel unprepared or distracted, tell them you need to call them back later and suggest a time for the interview. It is always better to take the time to collect your thoughts and focus your attention on the interview topic. ➔ Check in with appropriate colleagues and gather resource materials and talking points so that you can refer to them during the interview.

If you are frequently called upon to do media interviews, consider asking your communications office if they can provide some basic media training to help you hone your skills.

### When you have time to prepare in advance:

- ✓ **Reality check.** When you are asked to do an interview, it is important to consider: Am I the right person to do this? If not, who is?

- ✓ Do not feel obligated to speak with a reporter if you do not feel comfortable with your knowledge of or authority to comment on the issue they are inquiring about.
- ✓ Find out as much as you can about the program or publication, who you will be talking to, and what they are writing about. A little research up front will help to minimize surprises during the interview. Check out the reporter's recent articles online, or see if they write a blog.
- ✓ Every interview is an opportunity to convey a message. To help you focus on that message, identify two or three major points you want to emphasize.
- ✓ Determine likely questions, and be sure you know how you would answer them.
- ✓ **Especially for radio and television.** Find out if the interview will be live or taped. Will there be call-in questions from the audience? Who is the correspondent? In most cases, most of your contact with the news outlet will be with a producer, but it is a good idea to request an opportunity to talk briefly with the reporter prior to the interview.
- ✓ **Especially for the Internet.** Live online chats with issue experts are becoming more common. These types of interviews require significant preparation as they are live, and reader-submitted questions from a diverse Internet audience can be unpredictable.

### During the interview:

- ✓ Listen carefully to each question.
- ✓ Pause and think before answering. Try to speak in short, complete sentences.
- ✓ Focus on your message. Keep it simple, and avoid jargon. Don't assume the reporter understands the topic or the issues in the same way you do – be clear and specific. Use anecdotes or examples to illustrate your points.
- ✓ Be truthful, and talk only about what you know. Do not speculate or answer what-if questions.
- ✓ Don't wait for the reporter to ask the question you want to answer. Find ways to bridge back to a point you want to make. For example, "I'm not familiar with...but I can tell you that in my experience..." or "That's true. But you know, there's something else that I think is being overlooked on this issue..."
- ✓ Avoid saying "no comment" if possible. This phrase is loaded with negative connotations. Some alternatives may be: "I don't think it would be appropriate for me to talk about that before we know all the facts" or "I would prefer not to get into that while the investigation is ongoing."

- ✓ If you are speaking on behalf of your institution, state its name in full and refer to it several times, especially in a radio or television interview, when large portions of your comments may be edited out.
- ✓ Try not to repeat an opposing viewpoint or inaccurate information when answering a question. Rather than: “No, the situation is not dangerous,” say instead “The situation is safe because...” Crafting answers carefully in an interview situation can be challenging – practicing in advance can help.
- ✓ Don’t be shy about repeating your main points. *Especially if your interview is pre-taped*, it is likely that only a few sentences of your comments will be used, even though your interview may last half an hour or more.
- ✓ As a general rule, all discussions with reporters are *on the record* and may be used in a news story. Sometimes reporters will speak to sources *on background* or *not for attribution*, both of which mean that their comments will not be attributed to them directly. *Off the record*, strictly defined, means “not for publication.” If you feel it is necessary to exercise one of these options, it is important to clarify the reporter’s understanding of what these terms mean. Otherwise, it is best to assume that all of your comments will be used.
- ✓ Don’t say more than you feel comfortable saying. It is okay to say “I don’t have an answer on that. Can I get back to you?” For national statistics you are unsure about, or for detailed public policy questions related to international education, feel free to refer the reporter to NAFSA.
- ✓ Don’t feel compelled to fill the silence. After you are done speaking, the reporter will often wait before asking another question to be sure you’ve said everything there is to say on the subject. Give the answer you want to give, and stop there. There is no need for you to fill the silence.
- ✓ **Especially for television.** Relax, speak at a normal pace, and use natural gestures to accentuate your point. Look at the interviewer, if present, not at the camera. Assume the microphone is on until it has been removed from your jacket or you have left the recording room.
- ✓ **Especially for radio.** Practice speaking in sound bites. Air time is precious, and your comments are more likely to air if you answer in short sentences. Let the interviewer finish the question before beginning to respond. What seems like a natural overlap of voices in normal conversation can sound jarring over the air. If the interview is being taped rather than aired live, you can ask for an opportunity to repeat an answer if you stumble over your words.
- ✓ **Especially for the Internet.** Remember to be succinct in this format – attention spans are much shorter online than over the radio or even on TV.

**After the interview.** Remember that the reporter and editor are the ultimate decision-makers about what direction the story will take and which information will be used. The best thing you can do is to focus on your story and your message. Never ask to see the draft of a story before it runs.

Be sure to maintain the relationship you established with the reporter through your experience. Keep in touch with them about the topics they are interested in.

## Writing Op-Eds

Op-Eds (named for their usual position opposite the editorial page) offer a viewpoint on a subject or take a stand on a current issue. Most daily newspapers publish opinion pieces. These are often written by syndicated columnists or members of the editorial page staff. Contributions from individuals in the community are also accepted by many papers. Make sure you read the newspaper you are targeting to get a sense of the types of opinion pieces being printed and make sure you are not duplicating material that has already appeared in the publication. If your submission does not get printed, ask about the online edition, where there is often more space for presenting guest viewpoints.

A good Op-Ed should state a strong opinion or unique point of view on a topic of public interest, and include a call to action.

**To pitch your Op-Ed,** it is good to make direct contact, by email or phone, with the person in charge of opinion article submissions at your local newspaper to talk with them about your article idea. This is the *Op-Ed editor* or *opinion editor* at large papers or, at smaller papers, the *editorial page editor*. The editor may ask you to submit a short letter describing the Op-Ed topic, or may ask you to simply send in the entire article when it is ready. Do not expect an editor to guarantee publication of your piece before he or she has seen it. For planning purposes, keep in mind that newspapers usually ask that opinion pieces be exclusive to them and often take five to ten days to consider a submission. Don't hesitate to follow up if you do not receive a response.

Op-Eds, like letters, should always 1) state the situation; 2) give background; and 3) offer a solution or a change.

### As a general rule, Op-Eds should be:

- ✓ Timely and locally relevant
- ✓ Brief (no more than 750 words – and some newspapers have shorter limits)
- ✓ Focused—don't throw in everything you ever thought of on the subject
- ✓ Personal—try including an anecdote, funny story, or specific example
- ✓ Accessible, with a story-telling style; use the active voice
- ✓ Submitted in the proper format. This can vary, but the standard process is submission by email (as text, not an attachment), with complete contact information including name, address, and telephone number.

Op-Eds should always:

- 1) State the situation
- 2) Give background
- 3) Offer a solution or a change

## Letters to the Editor

Letters to the Editor should not be written every time a small mistake or misquote appears in the paper. Responding to negative news is also a debatable reason for a letter because it may serve only to draw more attention to the negative aspect of a story. If you have a quibble about something in a news article, try contacting the reporter directly. Friendly, tactful feedback is usually appreciated.

A more official letter can, however, be used to clarify a serious inaccuracy, react to a situation, or create interest in a subject that has not been adequately covered by the news media.

### Letters should:

- ✓ Be brief (no more than 250 words)
- ✓ Be timely—send your letter no more than one or two days after the article appears
- ✓ Focus on one issue—don't throw in everything you didn't like about the article
- ✓ Include your contact information
- ✓ Be signed
- ✓ Never attack a reporter

Letters should 1) state the situation; 2) give essential background; and 3) offer a solution or alternative.

Be sure to follow up to confirm that your letter was received and considered. Keep in mind that very little room is allotted for letters in most newspapers. Look for other opportunities to comment on articles, such as in the online edition or a blog affiliated with the newspaper.

## Meeting with the Editorial Board

Editorial board members are busy people, and this kind of meeting is not easy to secure. It should be viewed as a significant opportunity to present an argument about a timely topic of importance to the community.

### Asking for the meeting:

- ✓ Follow the editorial pages and get to know the paper's official positions on topics you care about. Writers are especially interested in hearing from sources about controversial or hot topics on which the editorial board is divided.

- ✓ Send a letter (usually by email) requesting to meet. If possible, direct your letter to both the editorial page editor and the writer or writers on the editorial board who are most likely to be interested in the subject of your meeting. Explain why your topic is timely and what you can contribute to the discussion. Suggest a couple of dates, but be flexible, and be sure to indicate who will attend.
- ✓ Follow up with a phone call. This will be your chance to again make the case for why the board should meet with you and what you can contribute to the debate.

### **At the meeting:**

- ✓ Designate a spokesperson or spokespeople who can concisely and articulately represent the group.
- ✓ Emphasize why your topic is timely and why the paper should write about it. Explain the local connection, and bring examples and anecdotes.
- ✓ Anticipate likely questions, and be ready to answer them.
- ✓ Remember the separation between the paper's news and opinion pages. This meeting is not the time to complain about the paper's news coverage. However, be prepared for the possibility that news reporters may also participate in the meeting.
- ✓ Take some brief relevant materials to leave behind.
- ✓ Send any requested follow-up materials promptly.
- ✓ Keep in touch – this is a valuable contact. Be sure to maintain the relationship by sending occasional items of interest.

### **Should We Hold a Press Conference?**

Press conferences should be used sparingly as a means of communicating your news to reporters. Consider other ways to get your message out. Is a live event necessary? A press conference should be reserved for the announcement of important and compelling news and, if possible, should involve a speaker with celebrity status who will be a draw for reporters.

Good reasons to hold a press conference may include: the unveiling of a major program, collaboration, or initiative; publication of a major report with high-profile backers; or significant breaking news. A press conference is a substantial investment in time and energy, so make sure your news warrants one.


Another way to expose reporters to an issue you are working on is to hold a panel discussion about a topic of current public concern and local relevance. Include local leaders, members of the community, colleagues, and students in your invitation list. Invite reporters too, and you have an event that serves multiple purposes, and could get some coverage, without the potential risks (such as a nearly empty room) that come with the traditional press conference.

## A few tips for press conferences:

- ✓ Timing is very important. Mornings are best, after 9 a.m.
- ✓ Put together a compelling, interesting lineup of speakers. Be sure each person understands the sequence of events and the role you want them to play.
- ✓ Stay away from known news events that may steal your thunder.
- ✓ Keep it short—typically no more than an hour.
- ✓ Provide written materials for reporters to take away with them.
- ✓ Ask reporters to sign in, and keep their information for future reference.
- ✓ Leave time for questions.
- ✓ Serve coffee and refreshments if possible.

## Media Relations During a Crisis

**Note.** Each crisis situation is unique. Each specific situation will require a tailored plan and response, and a close partnership with your communications office is essential. This is an important topic that merits fuller treatment than is possible in this handbook. What follows are general guidelines.

In a crisis situation, any advance work you have done to build relationships with reporters and establish yourself as a credible source will be very valuable. Good interview skills ( **Tools of the Trade**) and good proactive communication with the news media will be important in these situations. In addition, you will need a specific plan for how you will communicate with reporters during a crisis.

### Plan ahead:

- ✓ Know your institution's policies about contact with the news media.
- ✓ Be familiar with the communications plans of your office and your institution.
- ✓ Establish a relationship with your communications office. Be sure they know you can be a resource.
- ✓ Know your leadership's position on sensitive issues.
- ✓ Keep fact sheets, background materials, and important campus contact information updated and accessible.

## During a crisis:

- ✓ Convene a crisis management team.
- ✓ Gather information about the situation. Monitor news reports from a variety of sources, including relevant print publications, blogs and online news sources. You should also pay attention to social networking sites like Facebook to gauge the online discussion taking place. This will help you prepare for questions from the media.
- ✓ Maintain strong lines of communication with other affected offices.
- ✓ Take the time you need to develop a consistent, coordinated message.
- ✓ Identify your spokesperson for the specific issue at hand, and provide regular briefings to keep the spokesperson up to date. Prepare an official statement, if appropriate.
- ✓ Consider possible questions and scenarios, and determine how you would handle them.
- ✓ Prepare and distribute appropriate releases and fact sheets—reporters like to have the basics on paper.
- ✓ Be sure reporters hear your message and get the facts. Don't wait for them to come to you.
- ✓ Update plans and messages as the situation develops
- ✓ Return calls as promptly as possible. Let reporters know when updates will be available, and get back to them as promised.
- ✓ Maintain a log of media inquiries, so you can easily get back to reporters if you need to give them updated or corrected information later.

**After a crisis.** Take the time to assess how each component of your media relations plan unfolded. What went well? What could have been done better? This is an opportunity to learn what took place and to fine-tune plans and systems for the future.

## Tracking Your Media Relations Activities

Setting up good systems for tracking news, accessing information, and monitoring your activities is essential for effective media relations. A few simple systems will help you get started.

**Your media contacts.** Create a simple system to track your contact with the media so that over time you can get a sense of which reporters are the most responsive, which types of stories seem most popular with the news media, and where your activities have resulted in coverage. Use a simple spreadsheet to capture information about reporters and news outlets that you would like to establish contact with, as well as those you already know. Create a column for notes about your communications with each contact. Add to the list each time you learn about a new

reporter or speak to a reporter for a story. For each entry, include the outlet name, reporter name(s) if available, and beats; relevant editors; address, phone, fax, e-mail; and the preferred method of contact, if you know it.

**News coverage.** Keep a file of relevant press clips, especially any that quote you or someone from your office or institution. These can be useful for sharing with your university leadership, or your congressional delegation, and will also help you to get a sense of how the coverage has progressed or changed on your issues of interest. This can include following print publications, television and radio broadcasts, as well as online news from blogs and Internet news sites. It can also be helpful to track conversations taking place online on sites like Facebook and Twitter.

**Important reference Web sites.** Bookmarking a few key Web sites on your Internet browser will help you to access information quickly:

- ✓ the “news” Web site for your institution
- ✓ [www.nafsa.org/press](http://www.nafsa.org/press) — the latest public policy news from NAFSA
- ✓ [www.newslink.org](http://www.newslink.org) — listings of news outlets nationwide
- ✓ [www.chronicle.com](http://www.chronicle.com) — daily news from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*
- ✓ [www.insidehighered.com](http://www.insidehighered.com) — an online source for news and opinion about higher education
- ✓ your preferred national news source(s)
- ✓ your congressional delegation ([www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov); [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov))
- ✓ following a number of blogs can be time-consuming. Site’s like Google Reader ([www.google.com/reader](http://www.google.com/reader)) allow you to read the content of several blogs at once. If you’re unsure whether a blog is worth your time, a site like Technorati ([www.technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com)) can provide some context.

## V. Pitching a Story, Or Catching up with One

These are just a handful of the possible story angles and story ideas that international educators can use in their interactions with the news media. Local and smaller regional media outlets in particular are often more open to story ideas, unusual or interesting local angles on national stories, or locally contributed commentary articles. Their news agendas are typically less complicated, and their “news hole” tends to be bigger than in the national media. More thoughtful and detailed coverage can be an additional benefit.

- ➔ If you see national coverage of an issue that might generate interest in the local news media, consider a possible sidebar on the local angle that you could share with a local reporter.
- ➔ Respond to what is already in the local news. If a story or editorial touches on an international education issue, consider submitting a letter to the editor or op-ed to continue the dialogue on the topic.
- ➔ If you see an interesting report, survey, or statistic on international education, share it with your local media. Suggest ways to tie the information to local trends or stories. If you or your institution use social networks and blogs consider putting this information there – you never know who may be paying attention.
- ➔ Pay special attention to members of Congress who are active in policymaking related to international education. If they are from your state or district, that is all the more reason to consider a local-level angle to promote a story in the media. To find out more about your congressional delegation, consult [www.senate.gov](http://www.senate.gov) or [www.house.gov](http://www.house.gov) .
- ➔ Whenever possible, invite reporters to cover campus events that focus on international education topics.
- ➔ If someone at your institution or in your state has received a grant, an award, or special recognition for their international education efforts, encourage them to publicize their project and invite the media to cover some part of it if possible.

Study abroad participants, international students and scholars, and faculty returning from trips abroad often have interesting and inspiring stories to tell. Encourage them to share those with the local or campus press. If possible, help to facilitate this through your communications office or your own contacts in the local press.

## **VI. Appendix**

Sample News Release

Sample Media Advisory

Sample Letter to the Editor

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

CONTACT: Ursula Oaks  
202.495.2553



**U.S. House of Representatives Passes Simon Study Abroad Bill**

WASHINGTON, June 11, 2009 – The Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act gained significant momentum yesterday as it passed the U.S. House of Representatives as part of the Foreign Relations Authorization Act for Fiscal Years 2010 and 2011 (H.R. 2410). The Foreign Relations Act, introduced last month by Representative Howard Berman (D-Calif.), is a comprehensive piece of legislation to enhance the U.S. foreign policy efforts of the U.S. Department of State and the Peace Corps. It also includes new initiatives like the Simon legislation that are aimed at advancing U.S. global engagement.

“NAFSA commends Representative Berman and the House of Representatives for their leadership on this legislation that provides a much-needed boost in our capacity to engage with the world,” said NAFSA Executive Director and CEO Marlene M. Johnson. “We especially applaud the inclusion of the Simon Study Abroad Act, which will increase fourfold the number of students studying abroad each year in quality programs across the globe and will ensure that our college graduates have the skills they need to meet today’s global demands.”

The Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Act is named for the late senator from Illinois, who believed that a more internationally educated citizenry would “lift our vision and responsiveness to the rest of the world.” Based on his vision and the recommendations of the congressionally appointed Lincoln Commission, the Simon Act sets the goal that in 10 years’ time at least one million American college students from diverse backgrounds will study abroad annually in locations across the globe, with an emphasis on destinations in developing countries. To achieve this goal, the legislation establishes an innovative new structure that will provide financial support to students to study abroad, while at the same time requiring U.S. higher education institutions to address the on-campus factors that currently impede students’ ability to study abroad. “It is the Simon Act’s innovative approach to leveraging institutional reform that will make it possible for this program to dramatically increase participation in study abroad – to make it an integral part of the 21st-century education of American college students,” Johnson said.

The Foreign Relations Act also contains other important investments critical to the effectiveness of U.S. public diplomacy, foreign policy, and national security efforts, such as: doubling the size of the Peace Corps; increasing the authorization for the U.S. Department of State’s educational and cultural exchange programs; providing scholarships for students from various regions around the world to study in the U.S.; authorizing the hiring of an additional 1,500 foreign service officers over the next two years; improving the State Department’s tools for recruiting and training these officers; and requiring the president to issue a report to Congress on plans to streamline U.S. export controls to better serve the needs of the U.S. scientific and research communities.

The legislation will now go to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for a vote. The Senate version of the Senator Paul Simon Study Abroad Foundation Act of 2009 (S.473) was introduced by Senators Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Roger Wicker (R-Miss.) earlier this year.

-----  
*With 10,000 members, NAFSA: Association of International Educators is the world’s largest nonprofit association dedicated to international education. Visit us at [www.nafsa.org](http://www.nafsa.org) and join our [Facebook](#) page to keep up to date on the Simon legislation.*

**-END NEWS RELEASE-**

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**  
CONTACT: Ursula Oaks  
202.495.2553



**MEDIA ADVISORY**

**Expert Panel to Discuss Role of Foreign Students in  
U.S. National Security and Foreign Policy**

**Monday, July 14, 2003, 9:30 – 10:30 AM**

National Press Club  
Edward R. Murrow Room

**Panelists:**

**Lee H. Hamilton**

Director, Woodrow Wilson Center  
Vice Chairman, National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States  
Former Member of Congress

**Doris Meissner**

Senior Fellow, Migration Policy Institute  
Former Commissioner, Immigration and Naturalization Service

**Judith Kipper**

Senior Fellow, Middle East Program, Center for Strategic and International Studies  
Director, Middle East Forum, Council on Foreign Relations

- **Pre-registration for this event is advised.**  
Email [ursulao@nafsa.org](mailto:ursulao@nafsa.org) or call 202.737.3699 x253

**Background**

U.S. national security and foreign policy specialists, scientific leaders, college and university presidents, academics, educators, and others are becoming increasingly concerned about proliferating governmental actions – each taken for legitimate national security reasons – that threaten to have the unintended effect of precluding foreign students and scholars from pursuing higher education, research, or teaching in the United States.

Secretary of State Colin Powell has said that international students are a crucial foreign policy asset for the United States. Yet today we are headed down a path that could unintentionally jeopardize international student exchanges and, along with them, U.S. security and leadership.

Join us to hear three leading experts, who share these concerns, speak about the role of international students in U.S. security and foreign policy.

*To view the NAFSA task force report on international student access, visit:*  
[www.nafsa.org/inamericasinterest](http://www.nafsa.org/inamericasinterest)

March 11, 2009

Letters Editor  
New York Times  
620 Eighth Avenue  
New York, NY 10018  
letters@nytimes.com

To the Editor:

Re "Foreign Workers Heading Home," March 9, "A Hiring Bind for Foreigners and Banks," March 10, and "Obama's Trade Agenda," March 11:

The economic crisis is worrisome, but lowering the blinds and shutting ourselves off from the global economy won't help. We only harm ourselves by closing ourselves off from foreign talent. When we get the best minds in the room and let the best ideas and strongest skills flourish, that's good for our competitiveness and our ability to innovate – and it's good for job creation too. And there are long-term consequences, too, to shunning foreign workers now. If talented people in other countries get the message that we don't want them for our companies, they'll be reluctant to come to our universities for study. And that will be a huge loss, not only for our schools and our economy, but for our relationships in the world.

Marlene M. Johnson  
Executive Director & CEO  
NAFSA: Association of International Educators