

ATS administrators engage in virtual event to learn crisis communications

By *MARISSA DECHANT*

As ATS continues to align itself as a hybrid learning organization, it has expanded its engagement opportunities via Zoom and a learning management system called Canvas. This month, administrators from ATS schools engaged in a three-day event—Communicating during a Crisis—that incorporated synchronous Zoom webinars and asynchronous Canvas activities.



Led by Lisa Kern, manager of member engagement at ATS, and Matt Huffman, vice president for communication at the In Trust Center for Theological Schools, the event targeted administrators who would be included in a crisis communications team at an institution—communication and development officers, presidents and chief academic officers, and admissions and recruitment officers.

“When the pandemic hit, I noticed member schools gravitating toward [Engage ATS](#) to reach out to one another with questions about communicating to their campus communities and to brainstorm suggestions on how to handle campus events as all of us quickly pivoted into ‘crisis mode,’” said Kern. “I thought it might be helpful to create an event centered around helping

member schools form an effective crisis communication strategy and team so they could feel confident and prepared if



Matt Huffman

and when the next emergency situation occurs at their institutions.”

During the opening webinar, participants learned why they should care about crisis communication planning. Huffman presented on the different types of crises and how best to prepare for communicating about them.

“Given what we’ve seen recently with faith-based organizations in crisis, clear communication has never mattered more. Whether we want it, we have a worldwide audience. With some careful thought now, you can be ready to work through any crisis,” said Huffman.

He stressed the importance of setting clear boundaries about who communicates when, where, and how, of working on a formal plan, of regularly assessing and reassessing, and of forming good relationships early, stating “you don’t pass out business cards during a crisis.”

Participants valued Huffman’s presentation and found his experience and comments helpful.

“I appreciated that Mr. Huffman was able to speak not just as a communications professional, but as someone

with direct experience in theological higher education,” said one attendee, as Huffman previously served as chief marketing and communication officer for Evangel University in Springfield, Missouri.

“After this webinar, I feel like I have an entry point and materials to jump-start a conversation with my staff and board members as to the importance of developing a communication plan that includes handling a crisis,” said another participant.

Following the opening webinar, participants were invited to begin their asynchronous activities on Canvas. Depending on their roles, they navigated through a “choose your own adventure” format that involved reading a mock case scenario that described a crisis situation at a fictional seminary, watching short videos offering tips on what their specific areas of work should be considering at certain points in the scenario, and a comment space to answer questions related to the scenario and discuss suggestions with one another.

“Loved the choose-your-own-adventure format! While light-hearted and entertaining, the scenario was also frighteningly realistic in many ways. . . The videos helped bring the content back to the opening presentation. I also really appreciated the responses shared by other attendees that prompted me to consider the situation a little differently than I usually would at my institution,” said one attendee.

In addition to activities for the case scenario on Canvas, participants were given access to downloadable resources such as “Guidelines for Effective Crisis Communication,” a “Crisis Communication Flowchart,” and

“Create a Crisis FAQ Page” to assist them in their future planning.

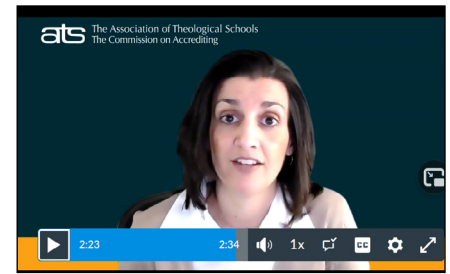
“I really wanted participants to have ‘take-home pieces’ from the event that they could actually use, whether they were refining their crisis communication plans or just beginning the process of creating them,” said Kern.

The closing webinar allowed attendees time to gather in breakout groups. They discussed what they learned during the event and named the biggest challenges at their institutions if a crisis were to happen.

Regarding aspects of the event that were most valuable, one attendee said, “I really appreciated being able to talk to other team members of the theological schools and pick their brains.”

“I really appreciated the instruction that communication in a crisis should always be rooted in the institution's values,” said another attendee. “That was not something I'd heard before, but it makes so much sense and will be a very helpful guiding principle.”

Kern explained that the Canvas site will remain open for participants to continue engaging in the discussion spaces and to offer suggestions on future topics they'd like to learn more about through ATS.



Lisa Kern



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