



# The Unforgiving Era

*Why higher education will be the next target in an age of increasing public outrage—and what PR pros can do about it*

**T**he Unforgiving Era. That's what Ann Barkelew, former vice president of public relations for the Dayton Hudson Corporation, dubbed our current decade back in 1991. It's an age of increasing frustration with just about everything, from business to government to even our fellow human beings. It seems nothing can escape the public's critical gaze. Its anger fills the airwaves: Sack our public schools. Forget about health care reform. Impeach the president.

In boardrooms across the country, leaders scan the news of the latest target of the public's wrath and wonder, "Who's next?" I think it's higher education.

Why? There are many reasons. The debate over rising college costs is foremost—Virginia Governor Jim Gilmore is just one

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of many state leaders to condemn colleges and universities recently for spending too much and having too little to show for it. Higher education's struggles with affirmative action, campus crime, fraternity hazing, and cheating scandals have been splayed across the front pages of every major newspaper and magazine. And factions within academe itself are launching a significant barrage: Faculty, for example, are no longer willing to blindly support institutions that have let them down with dubious admissions decisions, tenure denials, and the perceived "dumbing down" of curricula.

Add all the other campus-based issues I've left out, and the possibility of a public attack becomes clear.

So far, higher education hasn't adequately anticipated or responded to these high-profile problems. The many campus presidents who come from academe simply aren't prepared to manage long-term national crises.

This is a major opportunity for campus public relations departments to step up to the plate. If they don't—soon—

higher education will join public schools, government, and health care as an object of public anger, with predictable outcomes: unfavorable legislation, decreased funding, alumni revolt, donor irritation, student riots, and more.

I'm not predicting the apocalypse. But considering the seriousness of these potential consequences, the irony is that such attacks would be largely undeserved, since most institutions continue to provide our nation with the most educated populace in the world. Only skillful public relations can change the course of this looming crisis.

## Old defenses don't work

Higher education has traditionally brushed off criticism with an arrogant "You just don't understand." Often the critics really don't understand. But campuses' responsibility is to help them learn, not put them down.

Dealing with issues is now tougher than ever, for a host of reasons:

- The public is regularly confronted with problems no one can fully understand: How can we reduce the federal deficit? Why do children murder children? Why are health care costs so high? So, people get mad and demand quick fixes, like metal detectors in schools or more prisons.

- In an ideal democracy, people should have a voice in every decision that affects them. But as technology makes change come faster and faster, it's becoming impossible for everyone to be knowledgeable enough on every topic to make an informed decision.

- Many believe that a college education—or the lack thereof—is a major cause of our increasingly class-driven society of "haves" and "have nots."

- Since the public no longer trusts either institutions or elected leaders, people often turn to third-party advocates to debate issues or to resolve them. For example, during the lawsuits over the safety of silicon breast implants a few years ago, the public no longer believed either the manufacturers or the victims' lawyers, so it turned to medical researchers to discern the truth.

**BY PATRICK JACKSON**



Illustrations throughout this section by Burton Morris for CASE

### What to do

After decades of experimentation, I've found one method that stands above the rest when it comes to predicting, preventing, and solving institutions' big problems. Issue anticipation teams, which make use of an organization's most highly trained observers and analysts, are a natural for higher education. Here's how they work.

A campus president selects a group of the institution's most knowledgeable advisers from all areas of campus and charges them with scanning the horizon in order to answer two basic questions:

- (1) What's happening out there?
- (2) Could it happen here?

As campus PR director, you should be

the president's right hand in this endeavor. Advise him or her about who on campus would make the most savvy team members, remembering that the wider the mix, the more viewpoints you'll have. Don't forget to reach outside of the traditional academic and administrative departments to recruit members from the campus police, health services, and student groups.

Once you've chosen the team, assign each member an area of responsibility. You can divide the areas in many ways—by issue, geographic region, your audiences' interests, or information source (say, your local newspapers). Then teams should get together regularly for brown-

bag lunches or other low-cost meetings that don't infringe too much on members' schedules. If people work in different locations, they can "meet" via telephone conference or paper exchange.

At meetings, members report on what topics are brewing in their area. When a similar subject emerges in several places or gets close to campus, the team can start a more systematic investigation to test just how threatening the issue is becoming. Then, the team drafts a report for the president or board addressing the issue *before* it affects the institution.

### Where do issues come from?

The term "issue" is by definition vague.

**Extra edition.**

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**Mediamorphosis.**

**Journalists:** They aren't what they used to be, says Fran Turcott, director of PR and marketing for Anne Arundel Community College. Today's reporters are more negative, aggressive, and focused on news that sells. To adapt, she says, try these three strategies: (1) *Give 'em what they need.* Get to know the reporters who cover your campus, offer them valuable information, and respond quickly to their requests. (2) *Get tough.* Handle media queries as you would any business decision. (3) *Be prepared.* Anticipate reporters' inquiries, train your faculty and staff members how to deal with the media, and recognize the realities—both good and bad—of your relationship with journalists.

**Tracking the trends.**

So what do people really think of higher education? Find out by visiting Public Agenda Online, a helpful World Wide Web site that offers statistics about the public's views on 18 national issues, including education, crime, Internet privacy, and the economy. You can access sections called "In the Headlines" and "About Public Opinion" for free, or subscribe to receive e-mail alerts about new reports, studies, and other online content. To track the site for yourself, go to [www.publicagenda.org](http://www.publicagenda.org).

**Faithful forecasts?**

Did the experts' predictions come true for public relations in 1998? Compare what happened in your shop this year with the speculation of various pros in the February 1, 1998 issue of *Interactive Public Relations*. Their top prophecies: (1) More journalists will go online for resources and story ideas. (2) Online newsletters will proliferate. (3) Having mastered the Web, PR practitioners will refocus on traditional methods like in-person interviews, press conferences, and mailings. (4) We'll start to see returns on Web-site investment. (5) Push technology will get hot.

With so much going on in the public discourse, it's hard to decide what topics warrant "issue" status—or even where to find such topics in the first place.

Ideas originate with key thinkers, academics, think tanks, associations, fringe groups, and the like. So your first step is to read a lot, in different areas. Look for the magazines, journals, and newsletters that these groups publish. Two of my favorite trend-watchers are the World Watch Institute and Teaching Tolerance.

Besides reading all you can, you should examine five specific places where issues are likely to erupt:

**1. Accidents.** They may be beyond your control, but preparation isn't. Most campuses have emergency or crisis plans for fires, floods, snowstorms, and other large-scale disasters. If you don't, you should. And when you respond to an accident, show that your first concern is for the victims; not whose fault it is.

**2. Scandals.** These are usually quiet, private problems until someone who's involved (often a victim) breaks the story. Scandals are very difficult to anticipate. When one breaks, acknowledge it and move on. You'll only do your institution harm by trying to blame someone or something else.

**3. Bedfellow issues.** These are scandals in which your institution isn't directly involved, but a member of your institution or a partner organization is.

Say there's a fight at an off-campus bar that's frequented by your students. Though none of them was involved in the fight, the media will probably take the opportunity to drag in your college's name—"Fight Breaks Out at Local Watering Hole" is certainly not as juicy a headline as "Bloody Brawl Breaks Out at Bar Popular with State U. Students." When something like this happens, the institution must express its concern but also distance itself by strongly noting that no campus members were involved.

**4. Disagreement.** Many issues stem from classic differences of opinion on public issues. It's what our democratic society is all about. The curriculum debate is a classic example. Since there will be different opinions even among your own alumni and friends, as the PR officer, it's your job to work with your institution to clearly explain its rationale without denigrating opposing viewpoints.

**5. Operational failure.** Here's where 90 percent of all campus crises originate.

They spring up from flawed policies; failure to monitor activities and personnel; or unlicensed behavior by students, faculty, or administrators. A recurring example is when a department overspends its budget without forewarning its dean or chancellor. This is when an accounting office representative on your issues anticipation team can come in handy.

**Framing the issues**

As teams start to identify issues that could possibly affect their institutions, it's helpful to have a triage plan for making issues manageable. You can categorize each issue into one of five categories—based on its state of development—to determine what type of response you'll need:

**Category 1: Latent.** An idea enunciated by someone or some group that hasn't caught on yet, but if it does, it would likely result in trouble.

**To respond:** Directly—but quietly—approach those who generated the idea. Initiate a friendly discussion, making sure they've got their facts straight. Most often, you'll have data or other rationales that the dissenting groups haven't even considered. If they don't come around, get your response ready in case the idea catches on. But if they're right, admit it and realign your institution's policies and actions.

**Category 2: Emerging.** The idea is catching on in some quarters, but it hasn't attained critical mass. In surveys, fewer than 10 percent of your key audiences say they're aware of it.

**To respond:** This stage is your last chance to deal with an issue before you're forced to make some kind of compromise. Emerging ideas require more active preventive measures, like quietly communicating the issue to your alumni and campus leaders. Your goal is not to create an issue debate but to inoculate key opinion leaders so that if the disease strikes, they'll know how to deal with it.

**Category 3: Hot.** The issue is currently in public debate. Since the only way to settle issue debates in a democratic society is through mutual accommodation, this means you'll have to compromise to get the problem behind you.

**To respond:** Hot issues demand crisis management and possibly damage control. You must decide what you can afford to give up and what you can't. In the current affirmative action issue—which higher education did little to forestall,

unfortunately—campuses may be willing, or forced, to surrender present admissions policies. But they can't give up campus diversity.

**Category 4: Fallout.** The leftover remnants of "hot" issue settlements can resurface as issues themselves. Again, an example is affirmative action. Campuses have argued that they need diversity, but opponents of affirmative action are starting to cite racial and ethnic "cliques" as proof that there's no real melting pot on campus anyway.

**To respond:** You must work continuously on all fallout issues to either bullet-proof your institution against them or deal with them after they've hit. A simple way to do this is to make a list of any unresolved issues from the settlement of a larger issue. This list should serve as a warning sign; make it a priority to solve these remaining items to prevent a fallout.

#### Make your case

Once you've identified your campus's most pressing issues, you've got to inform your president and board. This is a PR officer's chance to shine. But you've got to do more than just present the problems;

you need to show how your institution might solve them.

When you're planning your presentation, consider how your president and board members think and act. Then tailor your presentation to their operating styles. You can take several approaches.

**1. Environmental scans** show where an emerging issue fits into the overall scene or subject area. These typically look at the effects the issue will have on four systems that influence every organization: political, technical, social, and financial. Think of this as a "force field" analysis, in which you show both the facilitating and the obstructing forces that influence the issue. You can present your findings as a timeline that shows both periods of quiet as well as times when an issue is likely to erupt.

**2. Projective scenarios** read like a short story or case study. As the authors, you and your team members develop a "plot" based on predictions about how an issue might develop and eventually harm the institution. For background, you might even survey opinion leaders or group members to verify or challenge projective scenarios from their own per-

spectives. Then, give two or three suggestions for how to avoid the scenario.

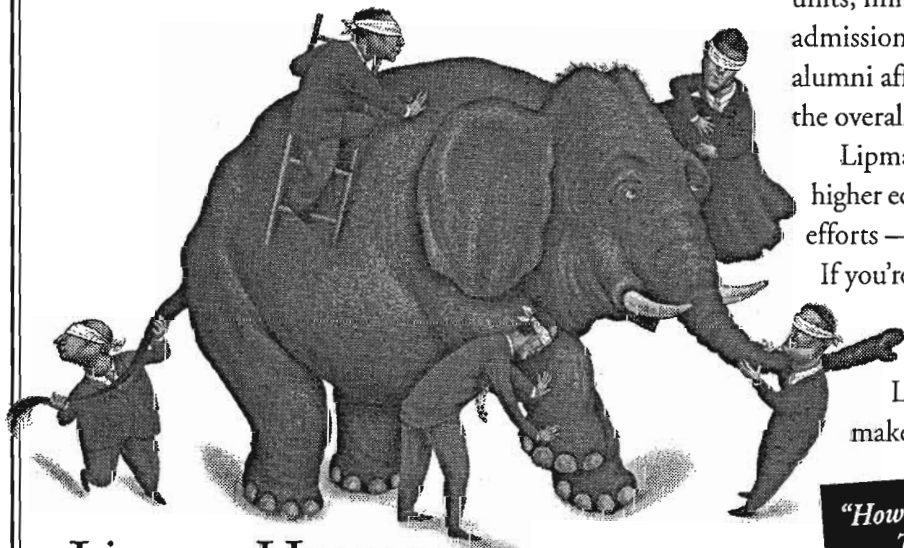
**3. Published public relations literature** can back up your ideas. Often your president and other leaders think PR is unreliable because they don't know about the extensive base of research and theory behind it.

#### Take a stand

If I were king of the world, with the power to marshal all available resources, I would feel certain that higher education could not only get ahead of its current and impending issues but also attain the position it ought to have in our society as the driver of a prosperous future.

But that power really lies in your hands. As the person in charge of campus communications, it's your job to jump-start your institution's efforts to identify impending issues and head them off. If institutions can start to talk openly and honestly to the public about issues such as college costs, campus crime, and affirmative action—and show that they're making headway in these areas—we may just be able to name the coming decade "The Forgiving Era." **C**

## Does your marketing team see the big picture?



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The fable of the five blind men and the elephant is an apt allegory for marketing at many colleges and universities. Individual units, immersed in the work at hand—admissions, public relations, development, alumni affairs—aren't always in touch with the overall institutional marketing effort.

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