



## **How Effective Are Your Media Relations?**

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As simple as it sounds, as we ponder how to increase the use of free media, it is essential to ask one simple question: *How effective are your media relations?*

Before responding, I would challenge you to measure your media efforts against those of college and university peers in Virginia, a state long known for high quality higher education. Pick three institutions: the University of Virginia ([www.virginia.edu](http://www.virginia.edu)), Virginia Polytechnic Institute ([www.vt.edu](http://www.vt.edu)) and the University of Richmond ([www.urich.edu](http://www.urich.edu)). All have track records of outstanding media outreach.

Why compare your efforts to theirs? In these most competitive of times for colleges and universities, it is not sufficient to merely communicate well; you also must have specific goals, outcomes and means to evaluate success -- or failure.

A closer look at those Virginia institutions would show sophisticated, strategic media outreach efforts. Each gets ample coverage locally, regionally and nationally. Each is led by well known media experts in higher ed. Juxtapose those successes, however, with an October 3 [\*Washington Post\*](#) article.

In that article, Virginia Governor Mark R. Warner forewarned the state's 15 four-year colleges and its community college system to brace for "larger classes, fewer course offerings and other cutbacks" that will follow "midyear tuition increases, layoffs and the elimination of significant academic programs and research."

The culprit: a \$2 billion state budget shortfall. Commonwealth public colleges and universities are facing campus spending cuts of up to 15 percent. University of Virginia President John T. Casteen III said from Charlottesville that he expects that university's board to approve a midyear tuition increase or raise surcharges to help offset state budget cuts.

Jump to the national picture: Depending on which stats you embrace, 40-42 states are currently in deficit spending, and in more than two dozen of these across the country, higher ed budgets are jeopardized.

Back to the question: *How effective are your media relations?*

I would argue -- and some will fire back vociferous responses to the contrary -- that if our higher ed communications -- including media relations -- were as effective as



possible, sweeping budget cuts such as those in Virginia would be less common, or certainly less severe.

Bottom line: it is no longer sufficient to communicate well with key constituents. You also must ensure that your communications better explain the value of your institution to audiences such as state legislators.

Thus, your college or university can no longer rely on traditional media outreach -- newspapers, radio, TV and the Internet, to be the primary means of best telling your success story. Why? Two reasons:

- 1) It is not working. If your goal is both to reach key constituents (in Virginia's case this includes state legislators and the executive branch) and to influence their behavior (to increase or at least not slash state spending), how well are their efforts succeeding? In too many cases, they are not.
- 2) Newspaper and TV readership continues to decline. Note a recent **Pew Research study** (<http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?PageID=612>) shows that evening network news broadcasts have lost audiences across all age groups over the last 10 years. The largest declines are in that most important 35-48-year-old demographic.

Further, the same study shows that newspaper readership continues to retreat. Specifically, the Pew study found that 41 percent of respondents earlier this year reported reading a newspaper the previous day, compared with 47 percent in 2000 and 48 percent in 1998.

Mirroring a similar trend by television viewers, in the last 10 years a large portion of lost newspaper readers occurs in that 35-48-year-old category.

Finally, a *Wall Street Journal* story recently noted the circulations of the 10 largest newspapers in the United States dropped 14 percent in recent years.

What to conclude?

As we begin to ask the crucial question -- *How effective are your media relations?* -- we must begin to set specific benchmarks (e.g., to enhance state spending or increase alumni participation or strengthen recruiting), then measure our efforts against these goals.

The days of counting clips to measure success are long gone.

*As always, we welcome your comments and thoughts*

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