When we began a career in higher education, we did not know crisis response would play such a large role in our job. Since 2018, we have served on two incident response teams at Jacksonville State University; the first was in response to an EF 3 tornado that tore through campus in March 2018 and the second being, the COVID-19 pandemic response. As we have served on these teams with our amazing colleagues, we have learned invaluable lessons on how to respond to a crisis.

**Have a plan.** It is important to develop a contingency plan prior to a crisis. Developing a plan prior to the crisis will allow you to flesh out possible scenarios, outline the institution’s planned response, and give your team time to test the plan’s effectiveness. Bring stakeholders together to talk about what crises could arise in your work and how you will respond.

**Transparency is a must.** Rumors can rapidly spread if people are not satisfied with the level of transparency during a response to a crisis. When the tornado touched down on our campus, we immediately noticed people on social media saying there were mass casualties. We chose to not respond or comment on this until we knew we could confidently say it was untrue. While transparency is important, it is also crucial to share factual information and not speculation. We monitored social media closely to identify any widespread rumors and addressed them in our subsequent communications.

**Keep the needs of students in mind.** It is easy to get caught up in the hustle and bustle of a response, and it is easy to forget what you have already promised in your previous messaging. However, it is crucial to remember we are here for our students and should keep them in mind when making decisions impacting them. We found the best way to keep up with messaging was to keep a list and present it daily to key administrators on campus. Additionally, when making decisions impacting a large majority of the students, it is beneficial to bring student leaders to certain conversations to get their input.

**Creative compassion.** When the 2018 tornado impacted our campus, our provost at the time charged our team to make decisions with “creative compassion.” Crises often present unprecedented issues and even the best-laid plans will not address every possibility. As a regional university in Alabama, a wide majority of our students are first-generation college students and often financially strapped. This challenged us to get creative to find accommodations for our students during a time of need. Whether it is finding a way for a student to access a bottle of
insulin located in their residence hall while the campus is closed, or providing iPads for the students who do not have a computer so they will be able to complete their academic requirements during a pandemic, we always try to find a way to assist individuals during a crisis. It is important to understand that flexibility and compassion are imperative.

**Document, document, document.** We learned in many crises it is important to document what the response team is doing including timelines, volunteer hours, goods donated, communications sent, money spent on the response, etc. Documenting this information is crucial for subsequent reports and possible reimbursements. At times it may feel like you are over-documenting, but it will make things much easier for you in the future when you are asked for a report.

**Frequent communication is key.** Frequent communication through multiple means is important when working through a difficult situation. In the beginning, frequent updates (multiple in one day) may be needed as the situation evolves rapidly. Daily updates may become sufficient once the situation stabilizes. While serving on both response teams, the fraternity/sorority life professional worked closely with public relations and social media professionals to communicate with students, faculty, staff, and community members. We answered questions, addressed issues, and relayed common concerns to the rest of the response team. It is important to remember there is no “stupid question” in a crisis situation. Do not assume everyone is operating under the same assumptions or with the same information. Previous communications may be overlooked, people may not have access to means of communication, and things can be forgotten in high stress situations.

**Meet your audience where they are.** You cannot assume everyone is reading content on social media, so get creative in terms of how to communicate with constituents. When we began seeing signs in January 2020 that COVID-19 could start spreading in the United States, a pandemic expert and JSU Emergency Management Professor, Dr. Jeff Ryan, created an Infectious Disease Task Force. The communications subcommittee immediately began working with key stakeholders in the community to develop innovative ways to communicate the importance of washing hands and social distancing in mid-February. We accomplished this through recording PSA’s, hosting small business summits, creating radio-ads, distributing flyers to local nursing homes, posting creative Instagram stories, sending engaging emails, mailing out information specifically to donors and alumni, and even podcasting. By doing so, we were able to ensure everyone knew the steps to help protect themselves during this pandemic.

**Self-care is important.** Find time to reflect and to connect with others throughout the response. Depending on the situation, people may be moving through the grieving process and will be in
different stages. You can only help if you are in a healthy mental and physical state. Take a break when needed, schedule meals, and identify trusted people you can confide in when things get difficult. During the tornado response, we found it was easy to work for hours without a break as we responded to the endless stream of messages and questions coming in. After a couple of days, we began scheduling specific mealtimes and were intentional about leaving our workspace for a meal.

During the pandemic response, we have found virtual check-ins, game nights, and quick phone calls are great ways to stay connected and have social interactions during a time of social distancing. Crises can be stressful, and it is important you give yourself grace throughout your response efforts. Many crises are unprecedented and there may not be a “playbook” for you to follow. Seek the guidance from experts on your campus and do the best you can in the moment. We learned that imposter syndrome can be a real challenge during these situations. Remind yourself that you are capable of making a significant impact and being successful in what you have been asked to do. Lead with the values espoused by our fraternal organizations; our values can guide our actions and help us be successful in our response efforts.

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